

# ESV Study Bible

By Crossway Bibles  
Reviewed by Tim Challies

The ESV Study Bible was created to help people understand the Bible in a deeper way—to understand the timeless truth of God’s Word as a powerful, compelling, life-changing reality. To accomplish this, the *ESV Study Bible* combines the best and most recent evangelical Christian scholarship with the highly regarded ESV Bible text. The result is the most comprehensive study Bible ever published—with 2,752 pages of extensive, accessible Bible resources.

Created by an outstanding team of 95 evangelical Christian scholars and teachers, the *ESV Study Bible* presents completely new study notes, maps, illustrations, charts, timelines, articles, and introductions. Altogether the *ESV Study Bible* comprises 2 million words of Bible text, insightful explanation, teaching, and reference material—equivalent to a 20-volume Bible resource library all contained in one volume.

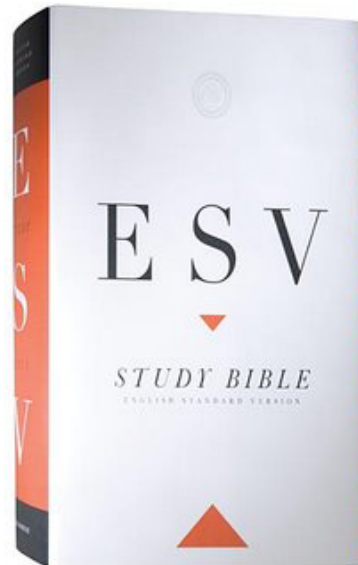
I still remember getting my first study Bible. It was many years ago, probably in the late 80’s, that my parents gave me the gift of a brand new *NIV Study Bible*. I used that Bible daily for many years though it was eventually replaced by a *New Geneva Study Bible* in the NKJV translation and after that by a *Reformation Study Bible* in the ESV. Today, if you drop by my home in the early morning, you are likely to see me reading from the *Literary Study Bible*, also in the ESV. On the bookcase in my office I have a copy of the *Archaeological Study Bible* (NIV), the *MacArthur Study Bible* (NASB) and *The Apologetics Study Bible* (HCSB). A visit to a local Christian bookstore will turn up many more and a search of publishers’ “Coming Soon” lists will show more still. Truly there is no lack of study Bibles available to us. And into this crowded field steps a newcomer, the *ESV Study Bible*.

Though I typically will not review a book until I have read every

word, I have had to make an obvious exception for this title. Reading every word of the 20,000 study notes and the more than 50 articles would be a time-consuming task.

This Bible’s 2,752 pages boast almost 2 million words. This makes it around 700 pages longer than most of the other study Bibles available today. However, I have had access to the complete text for several weeks now and have taken many opportunities to read through parts of the Bible.

The ESV team has done an excellent job of generating excitement for the *ESV Study Bible* and particularly so among the type of person who tends to read my book reviews. So in this review I will try to cut through the hype and, to the best of my ability, judge this new Bible on its own merits. After all, at \$35 or \$40 for the hardcover edition (and upwards of \$200 for the premium calfskin edition) this Bible is not an insignificant investment.



## How to Use a Study Bible

There are some Christians who feel that study Bibles are not ultimately helpful to Christians. After all, we have been given the Holy Spirit who promises to us that He will help us to know and to apply the Scriptures. While I understand these concerns, I feel that study Bibles can be immensely helpful and especially so to those who do not have extensive reference libraries or extensive theological training. However, these Bibles must be used properly. The biblical text must book-end any study of Scripture. The Introduction to the *ESV Study Bible* says it well. "The best way to use a study Bible, therefore, is always to begin and end with the words of the Bible. We should always begin by reading the Bible's actual words, seeking with our hearts and our minds to understand these words and apply them to our lives. Then, after starting with the words of the Bible itself, we can turn to the study notes and many other study Bible resources for information about the background to the text, for the meaning of puzzling words or phrases, and for connections to other parts of the Bible. Finally, we should return again to the Bible itself, reading it with a new and deeper understanding, asking God to speak through his Word to the situation of our life and to draw us near to himself." We will proceed through this review with the understanding that the notes and maps and articles and cross-references within any study Bible, helpful though they may be, are only supplementary to the words of God.

## English Standard Version

It goes without saying that the heart of the *ESV Study Bible* is the English Standard Version. This is considered by many biblical scholars to be a superior translation of the Bible and it is fast becoming the de facto translation amongst conserva-

tive and Reformed Christians. For the purposes of this review I will not defend or criticize the ESV as a translation. However, it bears mention that, while I am not as dogmatic as some when it comes to Bible translations, I do feel that the ESV is the best translation available today. As I understand the issues, it represents the best combination of readability and faithful translation. It is a joy to read and I find it as simple as any translation to memorize. While there are several other excellent English translations available, the ESV is top of the class.

## Look & Feel

The *ESV Study Bible* has launched with eight editions: Hardcover, TruTone Brown, TruTone Classic Black, Black Bonded Leather, Burgundy Bonded Leather, Black Genuine Leather, Burgundy Genuine Leather and Premium Calfskin Leather.

In any edition the *ESV Study Bible* looks great. It is contemporary in its coloring (white is dominant with orange accents in the hardcover) and in the triangle which shows up throughout (on the cover, to mark headings, and even as a bullet for lists of information). The rectangle has no deeper significance than a simple design element. In an interesting but effective design decision, the TruTone editions have this triangle stitched to the cover. The leather editions have "ESV" in large gold letters on the spine with "Study Bible," "English Standard Version" and "Crossway" in smaller gold type. The TruTone has the same text but with the "ESV" embossed. The hardcover features black and orange backgrounds on the spine with the text printed over top. The standard ESV guarantee applies to these Bibles, meaning that a customer who discovers manufacturing defects during normal use can return the Bible to have it

replaced with one of equal or greater value.

The Bible is made to be durable. It is Smyth sewn which is the binding process considered by many to be the best and longest-lasting method. It allows the Bible to lie flat even on page one and on page 2,752 (at least in the TruTone). It is printed on “high-opacity, high-quality French Bible paper” and in a single-column format with the cross-references in the inside margin. The paper is thin and light but still sturdy. My two year-old put the Bible to the test when she inadvertently stepped on it while it was lying open. The page wrinkled under her heel but did not tear. I also learned from her that chewing gum can be removed from the cover of the TruTone while permanent marker cannot. The fonts are very dark and easy to read with a heavy black serif font for the biblical text and a thin black sans-serif for the notes and cross-references. The page headings are in a bold gray with page numbers in a thin gray. Chapter numbers are a large gray serif font while headings are italicized black sans-serif. The pages display a fair bit of bleed-through where, when you look at a page, you can see the ink showing through from the previous page or two. Most of us are accustomed to this bleed-through in our Bibles. Where it is a bit more apparent and distracting is where it shows through on the maps and illustrations.

One feature that has received much attention in the *ESV Study Bible* is its use of color. Most study Bibles offer maps and illustrations only in grayscale. The *ESV Study Bible*, though, offers full-color illustrations and maps. This is quite a nice feature. The splashes of color throughout, including colored highlighting and shading, are unexpected to my eye but very effective. Though the standard glossy maps in the back of the Bible are superior in quality to the ones scattered through-

out, even the smaller maps are nicely done and provide important geographical context without having to slip to the Bible’s final pages. The illustrations, commissioned specifically for this project, are very well done and nicely supplement the notes.

### **ESV Study Bible Online**

The *ESV Study Bible* is one of only a couple of study Bibles to offer an extensive online component to accompany the Bible. Included with each Bible is a registration code that will allow the customer to access the ESV Online Study Bible. There they will find the complete text of the Bible along with all of the study notes, articles, maps, and all the other features of the Bible. Unique online features include the ability to create and save personalized online notes; to search and follow interactive links between notes, maps, articles, charts, timelines, illustrations, and cross-references; and to listen to audio recordings of the ESV. It adds interactive features that are only possible in a computer-based environment. While the online component is a useful addition to the Bible (and a free one!), at this time it seems under-developed and I suspect many readers will find that they do not refer to it very often.

### **Format**

Each book of the Bible begins with an extensive introduction. This may include sections dealing with Time, Date and Title; Author; Theme; Key Themes; Purpose, Occasion and Background; Literary Features; Outline; and so on. Particularly important is the History of Salvation Summary which sets each of the books within the context of the wider body of Scripture and hence within the history of salvation. Introductions may also include timelines, maps, and notes on literary features specific to that book. In every case,

the reader will receive a thorough explanation as to the book's authorship, purpose and context in God's plan of salvation.

The text notes vary in density but typically comprise about half of each page in the New Testament and perhaps a third in the Old Testament. They focus primarily on explanation and rarely on application. In one handy feature, highlighted notes correspond to primary points in the outline while highlighted verses and headings within the notes correspond to secondary points in the outline.

### **Scholarship**

The *ESV Study Bible* has been produced by as good a group of scholars as any study Bible. The General Editor is Wayne Grudem, the Theological Editor is J.I. Packer, the Old Testament Editor is C. John Collins and the New Testament Editor is Thomas Schreiner. The study note contributors represent a broad cross-section of reputable Evangelical scholars. The articles included within the Bible have been contributed by some well-known pastors and scholars, including John Piper, David Powlison, Darrell Bock, Leland Ryken, R. Kent Hughes, Daniel Wallace, and many more.

### **Controversial Theology**

One concern people are likely to have when considering a new study Bible concerns the theological perspective offered in the notes. Does this particular study Bible take a Reformed or Arminian position on salvation? A complementarian or egalitarian perspective on gender roles? An amillennial or premillennial position on the end times? I looked through many of the notes seeking what this Bible says on some of the more common controversies: end times, spiritual gifts and soteriology. I found this an interesting comparison with the *Reformation Study*

*Bible*. It seems to me that the *Reformation Study Bible* came from a much more narrowly-defined theological position; it was Reformed, it was cessationist, it was amillennial. The *ESV Study Bible*, on the other hand, offers a wider or less-defined perspective. Where the doctrine is clear and undisputed among Evangelicals, so too are the notes. But where doctrines are controversial and within the area of Christian freedom or disputable matters, the notes tend not to take a firm position, even when the author or editor is firmly in one camp or the other. Whether this is positive or negative may well depend on the individual reader.

To satisfy my curiosity, I opened my *NIV Study Bible*, *Reformation Study Bible*, *MacArthur Study Bible* and *ESV Study Bible* and compared their notes on several areas of controversial theology—end times, predestination and spiritual gifts. None of these Bibles offered notes that were unbiblical so I was left looking for the differences in perspective. In general I found that the *MacArthur Study Bible* offered the most defined position. This makes good sense as it represents the position of a single individual. This was followed by the *Reformation Study Bible* which offers the position of many individuals but each of them drawn from a very consistent theological position. The *ESV Study Bible* came next, offering a charitable but open view on most of these issues. The *NIV Study Bible* seemed almost to shy away from some of the issues. So while it is clear that the *ESV Study Bible* is not distinctly Reformed in its position, neither is it Arminian. It is not cessationist or continuationist and is neither amillennial nor premillennial. In fact, it seems as if it emulates the parent who tells one of his children to cut the last piece of cake in half and the other to choose the first piece. In many cases a person from one perspective wrote the notes while a person from the other per-

spective screened them. This ensures the notes maintain both charity and some degree of objectivity in those areas of dispute.

Having looked at the areas of dispute, I would not hesitate to recommend the *ESV Study Bible* to either new or mature Christians. The matters at the heart of the faith are described and defended while the matters of lesser importance are presented charitably and non-dogmatically.

### **Conclusion**

I suspect that many of the people reading this review will already be owners of at least one study Bible. I feel it is important to affirm that there is nothing innately wrong with the *Reformation Study Bible*, *The New Geneva Study Bible*, the *MacArthur Study Bible* and many of the other similar products. If you are currently using one of these Bibles and are happy with it, there may be fewer compelling reasons to rush out and purchase the *ESV Study Bible*. I have used the *Reformation Study Bible* and its predecessor for many years with great benefit. I have no doubt that I will continue to refer to it.

Crossway Bibles, *ESV Study Bible*. Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008.

With that said, I think the *ESV Study Bible* is an incredible resource. A long list of endorsers have expressed their excitement for its theological faithfulness, its accessibility, its insight, its scholarship, its practicality and its sheer excellence. I would simply append my name to this list. I agree wholeheartedly with C.J. Mahaney who writes, "I can't imagine a greater gift to the body of Christ than the *ESV Study Bible*. It is a potent combination indeed: the reliability and readability of the ESV translation, supplemented by the best of modern and faithful scholarship, packaged in an accessible and attractive format. A Christian could make no wiser investment for himself, a pastor could recommend no better resource for his congregation." This is a powerful resource and one that can aid any reader of Scripture. It is one I recommend wholeheartedly.

Early in this review I wrote, "Today, if you drop by my home in the early morning, you are likely to see me reading from the *Literary Study Bible*." I think it's safe to say that, if you drop by my home early tomorrow morning, you are likely to see me reading from the *ESV Study Bible*.

# For Us and For Our Salvation

## The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church

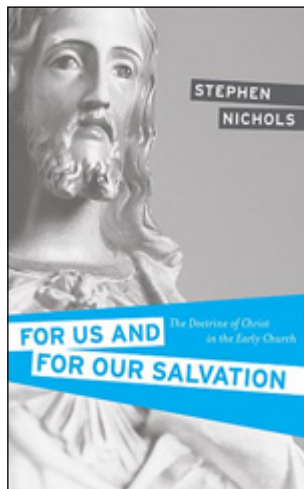
By Stephen J. Nichols

Reviewed by Allen Mickle

Stephen Nichols is fast becoming one of my favourite authors. Nichols (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary), is Research Professor of Christianity and Culture at Lancaster Bible College in Lancaster, PA. He is the author and editor of a number of books. He has the uncanny ability to turn difficult theological and historical issues into things interesting and even exciting for the average Christian reader. His, "Guided Tour" books are helpful introductions to the lives and theology of key Christian leaders in history. Now he is turning to issues of cultural history as well with his recent books on Blues music and his cultural history of Jesus in America. Nichols knows that the study of church history and historical theology is essential to the church and the believer today. His book on the doctrine of Christ in the early church is no exception.

We live in a day of historical anemia. People have absolutely no historical context in which to understand the theological trends of the day. Little do most know that much of what is considered "new"

in theological trends and fads is hardly new but generally has been dealt with in the church before simply under different names. That is where looking at the person and work of Christ as discussed by the early church fathers is so important. Much of what we consider orthodox Christology was developed in the early church. The early church fathers had to deal with heresy as



they attempted to understand issues like the divine and human natures in Christ, and other theological issues. The title of the book presents the reason why this is important. The true biblical nature of Christ is the basis for our salvation. Without a true picture of Christ, how can one truly be

saved? Nichols addresses the importance of studying the fathers on these issues when he writes:

*The early church fathers wrestled with the same problems presented by The Da Vinci Code phenomenon and its fanciful speculations about Jesus. They wrestled with the same problems presented by Islam and its adamant denial of the*

Stephen J. Nichols is a professor at Lancaster Bible College and Graduate School. He earned a Ph.D. from Westminster Theological Seminary. He has written several books, including *Pages from Church History*. He lives with his wife and two sons in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He is the author of many books, including *The Reformation: How a Monk and a Mallet Changed the World*, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to the Passion of the Christ*, and *Getting the Blues: What Blues Music Teaches Us about Suffering and Salvation*.

*deity of Christ. And they wrestled with the same problems presented by the scholars working in the Jesus Seminar or in Gnostic texts like the Gospel of Judas who quickly dismiss the four canonical Gospels as God's true revelation to humanity. In the days of the early church, the names of the opponents were different from those faced by us today, but the underlying issues bear a striking resemblance. When the church fathers responded with the orthodox view of Christ, they did the church of all ages a great service (p. 14).*

So, Nichols looks at the early church debates over the person and work of Christ. These were not trivial debates but were at the heart of our very relationship with God and our salvation. While looking at a number of church fathers he addresses the importance of the debates over Christ at the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon and the work of the great Athanasius and Leo. He looks at the theology of the opponents of the orthodox picture of Christ presented in the creeds that developed at the councils, the historical context that these debates occurred, and the major orthodox players who helped to shape what we consider the true picture of Christ today as evangelicals.

The biggest strength of the volume is that Nichols, as a historian, realizes that we cannot simply focus on secondary sources or that even Nichols own analysis is sufficient to understanding these issues. One must look to the original sources. To that end, Nichols offers the original writings of those on both sides of the debates.

Nichols, Stephen J., *For Us and for Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2007.

So you will read the works of Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Tertullian, but you will also read from the Gnostic texts and Arius. It is important to look at both sides to see how ultimately, the church came to the expression of Christology that we consider orthodox today as expressed in the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds. No one can truly understand the issues unless they look at the writings of the times. This helps but those debates in historical context and helps us to see the importance for us today.

These issues are not just old ones. We are facing the same issues today under new names. Therefore it is important to read the works of the early church fathers who dealt with these issues before. These issues are not tangential to the Christian life. They are at the core! Without an orthodox view of the person and work of Christ our salvation rests on no foundation. Only the God-man Jesus Christ, fully divine, and fully human, has the power to forgive sin and restore fellowship with the Father. Therefore, Nichols' book is a clarion call to all believers in this day to know in whom they have believed, and are persuaded that He is able to keep that which they have committed unto Him against that day. Our very salvation rests upon the person and work of Christ. May we shake off our theological and historical confusion and look to the Scriptures and the work of those who have gone before us as we seek to live our life for the one that came to save us, Christ Jesus our Lord. This book is highly recommended to that end for everyone who names the name of Christ.