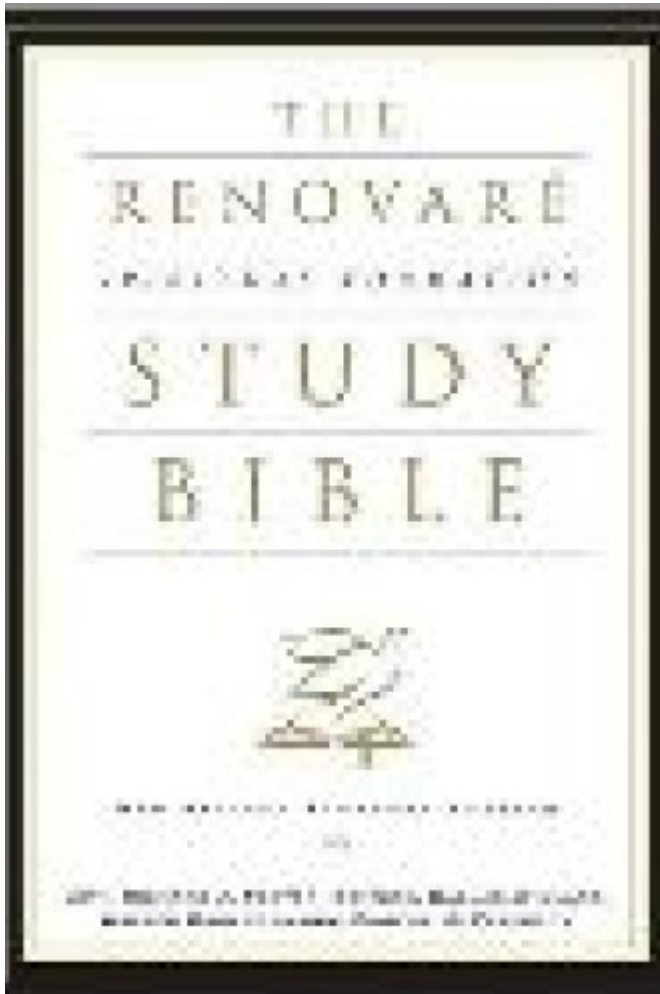


For heart and mind

By [David Rensberger](#) in the [October 18, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible: New Revised Standard Version

Richard J. Foster, ed.
HarperSanFrancisco

It has been over 25 years since Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* began introducing Protestants to classical Christian spiritual disciplines. Now Foster's organization, Renovaré, has produced a study Bible that aims to make scripture a primary means for discovering, learning and practicing those disciplines. The result is by turns inspiring, thought-provoking, puzzling and exasperating.

This is a large volume, and its size is proportional to its aim: to be "a study Bible that will help us experience scripture as living and active, forming and transforming" and "will combine the highest possible biblical scholarship with the deepest possible heart devotion." The introductory essay of this complex book asserts that the unity of the Bible is to be found in the development of life with God as an earthly reality centered in Jesus. This "Immanuel Principle," the essay contends, is a cosmic principle used by God throughout creation and redemption. It is the only right guide to human life and "even illuminates the future of the universe." The *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible* views all the biblical books in the light of this principle, showing "how the 'with-God' life works in all the circumstances of human existence and through all times."

I found these claims for the "with-God" life problematic. Is it necessary to set up such a vast and convoluted framework to interpret the Bible for spiritual formation? The framework is pretty flexible, so it does not feel as forced as it might; and it could have value for people who are not familiar with the sweep of the Bible and want to understand how particular texts relate to particular themes. It would be possible, though, to benefit from the *RSFB* while completely ignoring the framework and the essays about the "with-God" life.

The introductory essay is followed by two overviews surveying the with-God life throughout biblical history. These divide people's encounters with God into 15 categories (including "exodus," "nation," "prayer and worship," "exile," "with Immanuel" and "in community") that are very loosely attached to the sequence of the canonical and apocryphal books. Fifteen essays concerning the with-God history correlate with these categories. The essays, especially the first five on the Old Testament, follow a rigid theological script that requires a purely historical reading of the biblical record, one that allows for no symbolism, no multiple possibilities of meaning. Sometimes this historicizing degenerates oddly into sheer fantasy, going far beyond the biblical text. For example, "generations of study of and submission to the law" during the monarchic period "created a kind of democratization of well-

ordered spiritual practice.” What has become of “the highest possible biblical scholarship” here?

The essays do contain worthwhile insights into spiritual successes and failures in the biblical story. The essays titled “The People of God in Travail,” dealing with Job and other writings, and “The People of God in Prayer and Worship,” relating to the Psalms, stand out for their treatment of the mystery of suffering and the poetry of worship. The New Testament essays frequently emphasize the international and transcultural nature of Christianity as inclusive community, offering a corrective to contemporary tendencies to identify Christian values with the American cultural outlook and military and commercial triumphs. They also stress that discipleship is apprenticeship to Christ that goes beyond initial faith and forgiveness, suggesting an alternative to the materialism of the prosperity gospel and the megachurch idolizing of size and personality. Despite these insights, however, the essays should be read with theological discrimination.

The book also offers 48 short profiles of people in the biblical story, many related to specific spiritual disciplines. Each profile includes questions for personal reflection, and most discuss parallels in ancient and modern spiritual classics, often making thought-inspiring connections—for example, associating Amos with John Woolman. Some omissions are surprising, in particular Jacob and Mary Magdalene. Despite some uncritical historicizing and overexercise of psychological imagination, these profiles should prove beneficial to many readers.

The introductions and notes that accompany each of the canonical and apocryphal books vary in their thoroughness and usefulness. Some of the best are by pastors rather than biblical scholars. Many deal sensitively not only with obvious questions of spirituality but also with difficult critical and ethical problems raised by the texts. Others, unfortunately, pass over such issues in silence.

The introductions to Matthew and Mark address questions of authorship in helpful ways. Those to John, Ephesians and the pastoral epistles simply assume the traditional authorship without discussion. Again, one must ask whether “the highest possible biblical scholarship” is being exercised here. By declining to engage critical questions, the writers miss opportunities to reflect on the real ways these books addressed the spiritual needs of Christian communities in later times. Despite this, and despite the frequent neglect of hard questions that modern social-ethical principles might evoke, the introductions and notes offer many original and

stimulating insights into the relevance of particular biblical books and passages for the spiritual lives of contemporary Christians.

Hundreds of notes throughout the *RSFB* refer to specific spiritual disciplines. Some simply make a link to the discipline, while others suggest a specific exercise to help readers implement it. A special index, in turn, lists all of the passages associated with each discipline. A few passages seem peculiarly chosen. The worst example is the use of texts referring to slavery to illustrate the discipline of service, as if the two were the same thing. The vast majority of the texts referenced in the index, however, offer cogent and often provocative examples (positive or negative) of their subjects. As for the exercises, some are study questions involving personal reflection, while others suggest specific activities. Many show a creativity and sense of spiritual integrity that should commend them to committed readers. The note on 1 Kings 6:1, for instance, suggests that the reader create something to use in private worship, treating each step in its creation as an act of worship in itself.

One other matter requires attention. Many statements in the *RSFB* raise serious problems for Christian relations with Judaism. The essay on “The People of God in Exile” seems to recognize the ongoing validity of Jewish life in the exilic period, but it asserts that “the overall outcome of the exile and subsequent return to the land is an increasingly repressive system of external rules that dictate personal behavior and public ritual”; the law becomes “a senseless, grinding fetish that brings death.” This lamentably backward view of Judaism is found in other essays as well, sometimes so sharply juxtaposed with more positive statements as to suggest two different authors. The ignoring of harsh passages such as Matthew 27:25 and John 8:44 in the notes is also problematic. All of this has the potential to create or revive a prejudice among those uninstructed in the realities of Judaism that should have been laid to rest long ago.

Other parts of the *RSFB* offer more hopeful possibilities. The panoramic view of the with-God life acknowledges God’s continued relationship with Israel in the postexilic and intertestamental periods. The note on Psalm 119 remarks, “People who have been taught that the Israelites suffered under or were burdened by Torah may be surprised at the psalm’s joyfulness. It brims over with how precious Torah is and with eagerness to be shaped toward the life it portrays.”

The *RSFB* reveals a state of uncertainty in Protestantism at the intersection of biblical studies, spiritual formation, social concern and traditional beliefs. The

unevenness of the volume is due not only to the different vocations of its contributors but to differences in outlook among them. It is instructive, for example, to contrast the emphasis on Paul's "submission to scripture" in Romans with the invitation in the introduction to 1 Corinthians "to hold in tension scripture that we love with scripture that makes us uncomfortable or even angry," to be "willing to learn, argue, listen and respond with a passion equal to Paul's own."

The best way to use this book may be to enter into dialogue with its authors, learning from new insights, celebrating areas of concord and engaging respectfully with debatable proposals. As the *RSFB* writers themselves often note, spiritual formation is a matter not of reaching intellectual certainty but of attending with an open heart to God's initiatives toward love, justice and faith.