



Bible & Life

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Give Heed to Reading

by David Dunlap

“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of the Scriptures, to preaching and teaching...” “When you come, bring the cloak I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.”

—1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 4:13

Paul’s counsel to Timothy, “Give heed to reading,” doubtless has reference to the public reading of Scriptures. Nevertheless, this charge to his “son in the faith” can certainly be applied to the importance of personal reading. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “When you come, bring...the books, especially the parchments...”(2 Tim. 4:13). The books that Paul desired Timothy to bring to him were most likely a few choice works—Jewish history books, exegetical and expositional works on the law and the prophets, portions of the Old Testament, and perhaps some of the poets from which he quoted in his sermons and letters. He wished to spend the last weeks or months of his life to the highest profit by studying and learning more of the Word of God.

The Christian who desires to grow spiritually and intellectually will be a reader of books. A doctor who desires to advance in his profession will be a reader of journals and medical works. So, too, the Christian must master the Word of God, its doctrine, and its principles. To achieve this goal, he must be a reader of solid and spiritually-rewarding Christian literature. However, today, the practice of reading good biblical and spiritual literature is at a low ebb. Sadly, in a day when many have more leisure time than ever before, the reading of evangelical books is ranks low on our spiritual “to-do” list.

John Wesley had a passion for reading, and most of it was done on horseback. He often rode forty or fifty miles per day with a book propped up on his saddle. During his lifetime he read hundreds of books on a wide range of subjects. Commenting on the theme of John Wesley’s reading, writer J. Oswald Sanders writes:

“After his Greek New Testament, three great books took possession of John Wesley’s mind and heart. These books were: The Imitation of Christ(Thomas a Kempis), Holy Living and Dying, and A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life by William Law. Those three books became very much his spiritual guides.”¹

Christians who neglect reading are not taking in fuel for the mind and food for the soul, and will, therefore, lack power in the Christian life. One’s heart grows by giving out, but the mind grows by taking in; and both are necessary to a happy and balanced Christian life. As a believer reads, he will find himself

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Wm. MacDonald
(1917-2007)

maturing in a way that will honor the Lord and make him more effective in his efforts for Christ.

A Fallacy About the Christians Reading

There are several fallacies that discourage Christians from reading. Probably, the most harmful of these is that you have to be a “scholarly-type” Christian to be an effective reader. Some have argued that certain Christians are “bookworms”, those who love books and reading, but others are just not the “student-type.” Some have the mistaken idea that a reader must be an “ivory-tower” scholar who always has his nose in a book, a pseudo-intellectual who haunts the halls of academia. In reality, a reader is just somebody who loves truth and eagerly pursues it, who believes all truth is God’s truth, who knows that books contain spiritual truth and godly wisdom of the ages. The apostle Paul tells us that one of the qualifications of a church elder, (which should also be true of all Christians) is that he is “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2). It seems reasonable that being “able to teach” implies being “able to learn.” Otherwise, what will you teach others?

Some anti-reading advocates have argued, “Jesus called His followers ‘disciples’ not ‘students,’ so we need to watch out for an over emphasis on reading.” If they understood the meaning of the word *disciple*, they would discover the weakness of their argument. Perhaps the nearest thing we have to the word “disciple” is “apprentice”, someone who lives with a master workman, watches him, learns from him, and puts what he has learned into practice under the watchful eye of the teacher. Reading is a part of our apprenticeship with the Lord; it’s one way He teaches and matures us for service. The Christian faith has always emphasized the importance of learning as a tool for living. God gave us an inspired Book, from which sermons are preached and books are written, and by which lives are transformed. When a believer stops reading, he stops growing in Christ. Every Christian should be a reader of great Christian literature. A reader will be a leader.

What a Christian Should Read

A Christian should be discerning about what he reads. After reading a book, many feel as if there was little spiritual benefit. The author’s message was a mile wide but only an inch deep. Some books should be tested, others should be swallowed whole; and then others should be chewed slowly, enjoyed and digested. Unfortunately there are many books that are not worth the time it takes to read them. Then there are other books that inspire, build up, and transform our lives. These are the books that one should read!

A Christian should read biographies of great men and women of faith. One cannot read about the lives of great Christians without having the heart stirred and the life transformed. Who can measure the value of learning of Hudson Taylor, George Whitfield, and Adoniram Judson? A Christian will greatly benefit from reading biographies such as: *George Mueller of Bristol*, by A. T. Pierson; *Hudson Taylor In Early Years: The Growth of a Soul*, by Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor; the life of Jim Elliot set forth in the *Shadow of the Almighty*, by Elisabeth Elliot; and the excellent biography, my personal favorite, *George Whitfield*, by Arnold Dallimore.

These biographical works will richly bless and transform the reader. A man is known by the company that he keeps; so too a man’s character is reflected and transformed by the books that he reads. Biographies teach us about self-denial, spiritual vision, the power of God, failure and victory, God’s faithfulness, as well as giving the reader a dedication to world missions.

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In addition, Christians should read commentaries on books of the Bible. This type of Christian literature is invaluable! These books give us a correct understanding of the Word of God, they feed our souls, and anchor us in important doctrinal truths. Bible teacher William MacDonald(1917-2007), in *The Believers Bible Commentary*, exhorts us:

“Don’t despise the commentaries...some Christians sneer at commentaries and say ‘I only want to hear the spoken word and read the Bible only!’ Sounds pious, but it is not. A commentary merely puts in print the best(hardest!) type of Bible exposition—the verse by verse teaching and preaching of the Word of God”²

Finally, every Christian should master the Bible, or at least devote hours and days and years to its study. He should always read the Bible, as George Mueller suggested, “with meditation.” After the Bible, the next most valuable book for the Christian is a good hymnal. Let any young Christian spend time prayerfully meditating on the hymns of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley alone and he will soon be a fine theologian. Then let him read a balanced diet of C. H. Mackintosh, William Newell, C. H. Spurgeon, H.A. Ironside, Matthew Henry, W. E. Vine, Alexander Maclaren, Alfred Edersheim, A. W. Tozer, J. Oswald Sanders, William MacDonald, and many others. The results will be more wonderful than he could have dreamed.

How a Christian Should Read

Why do the Christians today find the reading of great books beyond them? It is frequently said that great Christian classics are boring and hard to understand. Reading and learning important biblical truths is a vigorous spiritual exercise. Enjoying a great Christian book requires a degree of consecration and separation from the world. Often, television, the internet, and other forms of entertainment can rob the believer of time and the spiritual vitality needed to read as he ought. Perhaps one reason why Christians are unable to understand great Christian classics is that they are trying to understand them without any intention of obeying them. The advice of C. H. Spurgeon(1834-1893) is needed and welcome:

“Master those books you have. Read them thoroughly. Bathe in them until they saturate you. Read and reread them, chew them and digest them. Let them go into your very self. Peruse a good book several times and make notes and analyses of it. One book thoroughly read will benefit you more than twenty books merely skimmed. Little learning and much pride come from hasty reading. In reading, let your motto be ‘much, not many.’”³

How can we get more out of the books that we read? A few rules for reading might be helpful.

- Read with a pencil and notebook in hand. Preserve what you read for future use. Never lose a valuable fact, quote, or spiritual thought.
- Mark your books in the margins, and highlight and underline important phrases and sentences. In the flyleaf mark important page numbers and ideas.
- Never pass by a word or a reference to a historical or scientific fact without seeking to understand it or purpose to seek out its meaning.

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C. H. Spurgeon
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- Re-reading anchors truth in the heart. Only by re-reading can the main points of a great book be fastened to the mind.
- Be varied in your reading. Read biographies, theology, commentaries, sermons, and much more. Variety is restful to the mind as much as it is to the body.

Conclusion

A problem in many parts of the world is the short supply of printed matter; in other lands it is finding the right book to read. The best book is not one that merely informs, but stirs the reader to inform himself further on a subject. A Christian should read history, science, prayer, Bible commentaries, apologetics, biographies, sermons of great preachers, hymnals, devotional works, theology, and many other subjects.

In reading, it is good to tackle something that is challenging. We should aim to read not only those writers with whom we agree, but also those with whom we may do battle one day. Let us not condemn an author out of hand simply because we have heard second-hand criticism of them. Read the author's point of view first, and then examine and test his views with Scripture. Don't be carried away by a new sensational Christian fad-book, but test it with the whole counsel of God.

Read some books for spiritual quickening. These authors challenge our hearts and consciences so that we seek deeper commitment to Christ. Other authors teach us the doctrinal truths which challenge our understanding of Scripture, and motivate us to learn more of the Word of God. Lastly, when we read, we have communion and fellowship with the greatest and godliest of men of all ages through the medium of their writings.

Suggested Reading

1. A. W. Tozer, *Man: The Dwelling Place of God*, (Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publication, 1966), p. 147-151
2. William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), Introduction
3. C. H. Spurgeon, quoted in J. Oswald Chambers, *Spiritual Leadership*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1967), p.156