

What Do We Read?

By John M. Brentnall

Despite the appallingly low level of literacy in the land at present, we in the UK are still a nation of readers. Television, computers, videos and the like have not yet ousted the old-fashioned habit of reading. The charge "Give attendance to reading" (1 Timothy 4:13) is as relevant today as when Paul sent it to his young helper. The question is, however; What do we read?

The bookshelves of Christian homes tell many a tale about their owners' reading habits. One I know is full of "crime thrillers"! Another contains piles of world war magazines. Yet another holds all thirty-eight volumes of the Church Fathers. Still another is filled with foreign travel guides. Yet another is packed with Puritans. The variety is revealing.

The stock on display in many "Christian" bookshops is nothing but a mish-mash of truth and error, if not worse. John Calvin jostles for place with Ignatius Loyola, Charles Hodge with Teilhard de Chardin, Samuel Rutherford with Rowan Williams, Tom Paine with J.C. Ryle, Medieval mystics with Puritan polemicists, and "Christian Atheists" with Reformed dogmaticians!

How may we distinguish a book of lasting worth from ephemeral trash? What criteria can we apply to help us separate the precious from the vile? Perhaps the following guide-lines may be of use.

Given the obvious fact that a book is not to be valued by its commercial price, but by its spiritual and moral quality, two major tests may be applied. Let us consider them.

1. Does the book agree with the written Word of God?

This test is fundamental, because the Word of God is the only inerrant standard of truth and error, right and wrong. The best books are therefore those that stand in the closest agreement with this standard. By contrast, no literature, however learned, eloquent or persuasive, is good if its teaching is out of harmony with Holy Scripture. If intellectual acuteness and literary style were our leading criteria, then Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* or Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* would be first-rate books. Some of us were once allured far astray by the dark pessimism of Thomas Hardy, the imaginative ravings of Aldous Huxley and the moralistic etiquette of Confucius - all recommended reading for unregenerate Sixth-formers. Even after conversion, we took up absurd notions of holiness from the "Second Blessing" school and false views of Calvinism from prejudiced Arminians. Let us then try every book by the touchstone of Holy Writ. This is a sure test; everything we read must stand or fall by its decision.

2. Does the book square with the Reformed Faith?

We add this test because many erroneous authors claim to find their views in the Bible. Who has not been led into some eschatological By-path Meadow by men whose theories of the Second coming were sacrosanct, even though they were based on a misinterpretation, some times, of one verse of Scripture? While no man or body of men is wholly free from error or imbalance, we may safely affirm that we shall not go far astray in studying the great Reformed Confessions and Calvinistic writers of the 16th - 19th centuries. For sound doctrine, nothing surpasses the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms* or the *Second Helvetic Confession*, while for a rich combination of doctrine, spirituality, and practice, presented with plainness, force and literary beauty - Luther, Calvin, some English Puritans and Scottish Covenanters, Robert Leighton, Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Boston, William Plumer and Bishop Ryle are unequalled.

Though some might recoil from the prospect of delving deeply into these mines, the rewards, through the blessing of God, would far outweigh the time and care spent on them.

Consider only a few.

a) In the first place, our outlook would be greatly broadened. Diligent readers of the best books, beginning with the Bible, would acquire an extensive knowledge of God and men, of truth and error, of themselves and the world, of history, geography and archaeology, besides much else. "Give me a candle and the Bible," said a wise old Puritan, "and I will tell you what the whole world is doing." A native of Armenia once expressed his incalculable debt to the King James Bible in opening the door for him to the riches of the English language. "I have no hesitation," he wrote, "in asserting that the Authorised Version of the Bible is not only the greatest book in English literature, but that it is also the greatest classic in the world." In his valuable *Homiletics and Pastoral Theology*, W.G.T. Shedd counsels us to read the kind of book that we could never have written.

What can be more valuable than a view of God's grand scheme of redemption, the history of His dealings with His people and their enemies, and the character and experiences of outstanding Christians and notorious pagans? Knowledge and wisdom, being attributes of God, form part of His image in us. Oh that our reading would give us knowledge and wisdom enough to serve our generation according to the will of God!

b) Secondly, the best literature ennobles character. While moral integrity is no substitute for holiness, it contributes greatly to the well-being of a person, community or nation. Benjamin Warfield reminds us of this in re-telling the experience of a United States Army Officer. He was in a great western city during violent street rioting. One day a man looking particularly calm and firm, whose very bearing inspired confidence, approached him. When the man had passed, the officer turned round to look at him, only to discover that the stranger had done the same. The man strode up to the officer, poked his chest with his forefinger and said, "What is the chief end of man?" On receiving the reply, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever," he said, "Ah! I knew you were a *Shorter Catechism* boy by your looks!" "Why," responded the soldier, "that was just what I was thinking of you!" Comments Warfield:

"It is worthwhile to be a *Shorter Catechism* boy. They grow up to be men. And better than that, they are exceedingly apt to grow to be men of God." Good books, even when our unregenerate hearts resent their contents, have influenced national character more than we are aware.

c) Lastly, good books have been blessed by God both to convert and to sanctify the most godless folk. Especially valuable in this respect are treatises on conversion and biographies of notable Christians. Guthrie's *Christian's Great Interest*, Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*, Matthew Henry's *Commentary*, Boston's *Fourfold State*, Scott's *Force of Truth*, Scougal's *Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*, Spurgeon's *Sermons*, Bonar's *Memoir and Remains of M'Cheyne* and Ryle's *Holiness* are just a few titles that have shaped the lives of thousands.

To conclude, only the Last Day will reveal how the course of individuals and nations has been steered in a certain direction through God's blessing of good literature. Distressed souls have been saved from despair; confused souls have been clearly guided, zealous souls have been fired afresh through the influence of good books. Pardon, peace, assurance, comfort, strength, warning, rebuke, restraint, fellowship, have all sprung up and been cultivated through selective and disciplined reading. Just wars have been won and long-standing peace secured, while entire cultures have been moulded for good through the impact of sound, spiritually-edifying books.

Let us, then, be diligent readers of all that is best in Christian writing, and let us seek the blessing of God on everything we read, so that our reading will be profitable for time and eternity.

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