

Brothers, Read Christian Biography

[January 01, 1995](#) / by [John Piper](#)

Hebrews 11 is a divine mandate to read Christian biography. The unmistakable implication of the chapter is that, if we hear about the faith of our forefathers (and mothers), we will "lay aside every weight and sin" and "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (12:1). If we asked the author, "How shall we stir one another up to love and good works?" (10:24), his answer would be: "Through encouragement from the living (10:25) and *the dead*" (chap. 11). Christian biography is the means by which "body life" cuts across the generations.

This fellowship of the living and the dead is especially crucial for pastors. As leaders in the church we are supposed to have vision for the future. We are supposed to declare prophetically where our church should be going. We are supposed to inspire people with great possibilities.

Not that *God* can't give vision and direction and inspiration. But he also uses human agents to stir up his people. So the question for us pastors is: Through what human agents does God give *us* vision and direction and inspiration? For me, one of the most important answers has been great men and women of faith who, though dead, are yet speaking.

Christian biography, well chosen, combines all sorts of things pastors need but have so little time to pursue. Good biography is history and guards us against chronological snobbery (as C. S. Lewis calls it). It is also theology—the most powerful kind—because it burst forth from the lives of people like us. It is also adventure and suspense, for which we have a natural hunger. It is psychology and personal experience, which deepen our understanding of human nature (especially ourselves). Good biographies of great Christians make for remarkably efficient reading.

Since biography is its own best witness, let me tell a little of my own biographical encounter with biographies. Biographies have served as much as any other human force in my life to overcome the inertia of mediocrity. Without them I tend to forget what joy there is in relentless labor and aspiration. I have devoted more time to the life of Jonathan Edwards (good biography of O. Winslow) than to any other non-biblical person. Before he was 20 years old Edwards wrote 70 resolutions which for years have fired my work. Number 6 was: "To live with all my might, while I do live." Number 11: "When I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances do not hinder." Number 28: "To study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive, myself to grow in the knowledge of the same."

When I came to be pastor of Bethlehem I began to hunger for biographies to charge my pastoral batteries and give me guidance and encouragement. Since I believe very much in the pastor-theologian, I recalled not only Edwards but, of course, John Calvin (T. H. L. Parker has a small *Portrait* and a major biography).

How Calvin could work! After 1549 his special charge in Geneva was to preach twice on Sunday and once *every day* of alternate weeks. On Sunday, August 25, 1549, Calvin began to preach on Acts and continued weekly in that book until March 1554. On weekdays during this time, he preached through eight of the minor prophets as well as Daniel, Lamentations, and Ezekiel. But what amazes me is that between 1550 and 1559 he took 270 weddings. That's one every other week! He also baptized (about once a month), visited the sick, carried on extensive

correspondence and sustained heavy organizational responsibilities.

When I look at Calvin and Edwards and their output, it is hard for me to feel self-pity at my few burdens. They inspire me to break out of mediocre plodding.

T. H. L. Parker (who, by the way, has spent most of his 40 years' ministry in country parishes) published a short study of Karl Barth in 1970 which I devoured in my middler year in seminary. It had a tremendous impact on me because of two simple sentences. One was: "That evening Barth began [writing] a pamphlet which he finished the next day, a Sunday [13,000 words in a day!]." I responded, "If neo-orthodoxy merits such phenomenal labor, how much more orthodoxy!"

The other sentence was, "Barth retired from his chair in Basel in March 1962 and so lost the stimulus provided by the need to give lectures." I wrote in the flap of the book, "Has greatness emerged from anything but pressure? If greatness is to be the servant of all, must we not be under authority, under demand, pushed, pressed?"

Recently I have been greatly encouraged in my own pastoral work by Warren Wiersbe's *Walking with the Giants* and *Listening to the Giants*. The main reason these mini-biographies have been helpful is seeing the sheer diversity of pastoral styles God has chosen to bless. There have been great and fruitful pastors whose preaching patterns, visitation habits, and personalities were so different that all of us may take courage.

One humorous example: Over against the austere Edwards, who measured his food intake so as to maximize his alertness for study, you can put Spurgeon, who weighed more than 300 pounds and smoked cigars. Both men won more converts to Christ than any ten of us will.

Spurgeon said to a Methodist critic, "If I ever find myself smoking to excess, I promise I shall quit entirely."

"What would you call smoking to excess?" the man asked.

"Why, smoking two cigars at the same time!" was the answer.

George Mueller has for years been a pacesetter for me in prayer. His *Autobiography* is a veritable orchard of faith-building fruit. In one section he tells us, after 40 years of trials, "how to be constantly happy in God." He said, "I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was to have my soul happy in the Lord."

For ten years, he explained, he went at this backward. "Formerly, when I rose I began to pray as soon as possible and generally spent all my time till breakfast in prayer." The result: "Often after having suffered much from wandering of mind for the first ten minutes, or quarter of an hour, or even half an hour, I only then began really to pray."

So Mueller changed his pattern and made a discovery which sustained him 40 years. "I began to meditate on the New Testament, from the beginning, early in the morning . . . searching into every verse for the sake of obtaining food for my own soul. The result I have found almost invariably is this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that though I did not, as it were, give myself to *prayer*, but to meditation; yet, it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer."

I have found Mueller's way absolutely crucial in my own life: be with the Lord before I am with anyone else and let *him* speak to me first.

One other thing impressed itself on me from Mueller's life. He prayed with astonishing confidence for supplies for his orphanage. But when his wife became ill with rheumatic fever, he prayed, "Yes, my Father, the times of my darling wife are in Thy hands. Thou wilt do the very best thing for her and for me, whether life or death. If it may be, raise up yet again my precious wife—Thou art able to do it, though she is so ill; but howsoever Thou dealest with me, only help me to continue to be perfectly satisfied with Thy holy will."

His wife died, and Mueller preached her funeral sermon from Psalm 119:68: "Thou art good and doest good."

What a world of difference between this view of God and the one I found when I read William Barclay's *Spiritual Autobiography*. Barclay lost a daughter at sea, but his response was not that of Mueller: "I know, O Lord, that in faithfulness Thou hast afflicted me" (Psalm 119:75). Instead Barclay said, "I believe that pain and suffering are never the will of God for His children" (in spite of 1 Peter 3:17!). To call a fatal accident an "act of God," he says, is blasphemous.

Barclay's *Autobiography* is the more depressing when I think how many pastors feed on Barclay for every sermon. He scorns a view of the atonement in which the death of Christ propitiates the wrath of God. And he says, "I am a convinced universalist." I can't help wondering whether the theological weakness of many pulpits is owing to the facile dependence on the anemic theology of commentators like Barclay.

I would rather stake my life on the theology of Sarah Edwards. When she heard that her husband Jonathan had died of a smallpox vaccination at the age of 54, she wrote to her daughter: "What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud. O that we may kiss the rod and lay our hands on our mouths! The Lord has done it. He has made me adore His goodness, that we had him so long. But my God lives; and He has my heart. O what a legacy my husband, and your father, has left us. We are all given to God; and there I am and love to be."

I close with a word of appreciation for a living autobiography—Carl Lundquist, who completes his 28-year presidency of Bethel College and Seminary this month.

I was in the middle of Augustus Strong's *Autobiography* when the opportunity came last May to write Dr. Lundquist a letter of appreciation. Strong, who was president of Rochester Seminary for 40 years, gave me the words I needed (which shows the value of biography for sermon illustrations). He wrote, "I have always thought that there must be a future life for canal horses, washerwomen and college presidents; since they do not get their deserts in this life, there must be another life, to justify the ways of God."

Living theology. Flawed and encouraging saints. Stories of grace. Deep inspiration. The best entertainment. Brothers, it is worth your precious hours. Remember Hebrews 11. And read Christian biography.

Topic: [Christian Biography](#)

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