



SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

THEOLOGY AND READING

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Theology and Reading

*I must judge for myself, but how can I judge, how can any man judge,
unless his mind has been opened and enlarged by reading.*

John Adams

Why should Christians read? Perhaps a personal testimony will help answer that question. As a systematic theologian, I am committed to reading copiously and deeply within each of the major theological disciplines, from biblical studies to historical studies to missions and evangelism. And as part of the shaping of my Christian character, I often consider the profound lives recorded in biographical monographs, or enjoy the periodic novel by such perceptive commentators on the human situation as Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gilbert Keith Chesterton, or Graham Greene. I find reading so beneficial that when asked what I do for work and what I do for fun, the answer inevitably elicits the same response: Read. Reading consumes much of my life. Indeed, when not with family or preaching or teaching, I am either reading or writing something for others to read.

However, the point is not that Christians should read indiscriminately, but that Christians should read what is personally edifying, even challenging, as well as what is affirming or aesthetically pleasing. Such edification entails reading books with which I may or may not disagree, but with which I must interact intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. Thus, I have come to read, for example, both Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of theological liberalism, and Herman Bavinck, a premier Reformed theologian, carefully and often, even though I find both thinkers to be fundamentally imbalanced at the same time they are absolutely brilliant. It is an established conviction for many of us that reading widely, consistently, and deeply is a theologically virtuous exercise.

This issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* is devoted to promoting this virtue of reading. Paige Patterson, President of Southwestern Seminary, begins the issue with a short explanation of why he strongly encourages all of his students to obtain 1,500 physical volumes prior to their graduation. Afterwards, Mark Leeds, our Registrar, presents a compelling essay in defense of why reading must be considered a virtue for the Christian. The remainder of the issue is composed of book reviews from various professors, pastors, and advanced theological students. Our

hope in bringing these reviews from experts within the various theological disciplines into one issue is that their constructively critical, keen, and appreciative minds will inform your own reading practices. The reviews have been arranged by subject area, typically alphabetically but canonically within the field of biblical studies and chronologically within the field of historical studies.

Related to the issue of Christian reading, I am often asked to provide a recommended book list for young Christians seeking to grow in their faith or for those preparing for vocational ministry. My response is twofold: First and foremost, I recommend in the strongest terms that every Christian read through the Bible regularly, both on his or her own and together with one's family. There are plenty of popular "read through the Bible" plans, and almost any will do, as long as both the Old and New Testaments are covered and daily Bible reading is encouraged. My earthly father's own plan was to get a new Bible every year and read it, marking in the margins daily what he had read and how God had worked in his life. Anselm of Canterbury understood the process of reading as that of *lectio divina*—the slow, receptive, prayerful "chewing" of the text. As a cow chews its cud, "divine reading" will similarly nourish and form the Christian soul to think with the mind of Christ.

Second, next to the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments, I recommend that every Christian should at some point read the following 15 works. These books are devotional and theological at the same time that they introduce the reader to the grand sweep of the history of Christian witness. They will increase your personal faith and deepen your theological convictions as you also bear witness to a fallen world of the saving grace available only in the gospel of Jesus Christ. I do hope they compel you to a closer walk with the Lord, as they did and still do with me.

- The Apostles' Creed, The Nicene (Niceno-Constantinopolitan) Creed, and the Athanasian Creed
- Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*
- Gregory of Nazianzus, *On the Holy Spirit*
- Augustine, *Confessions*
- Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*
- Erasmus of Rotterdam, Preface to the Greek New Testament (or *Paraclesis*)
- Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*
- Balthasar Hubmaier, *The Christian Baptism of Believers*
- John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*
- Philip Jacob Spener, *Pia Desideria*
- J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (or *Discipleship*)
- Clive Staples Lewis, *Mere Christianity*
- Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*
- John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*

Some of these books are longer than others. Some will be more difficult than others—So, do not get bogged down, just keep going! Some are available freely as digital books on the web; others will require purchase or library loan. Some may be available in multiple translations. If you can read these books in the original Greek, Latin, German, or English versions, so much the better; however, modern translations will be more than adequate for the beginner. By the way, although it would be best for you to learn both Greek and Hebrew, so that you may more adequately approach the biblical texts, the layperson may want to begin his or her biblical language studies with an Interlinear Greek-English New Testament or an interlinear text that correlates the Greek New Testament with your own primary language.

When one of history's greatest minds, Augustine of Hippo, was struggling with God's call for him to convert, it was in the context of reading both Scripture and biography. At a house in Milan, Augustine was reading a biography, *The Life of Antony*, with a friend, and was profoundly convicted of his sinfulness. Wavering on the knife-edge of decision, Augustine walked into the garden and threw himself on the ground by a fig tree, weeping over his inability to choose between God and the world. There, at the summit of his spiritual crisis, he perceived a child sweetly singing, "Take it and read, take it and read." Remembering Antony's conversion to God through hearing the Gospels being read, Augustine took the child's song to be a divine command to take up the Bible and read it. Hastening back to his friend, Augustine grasped the epistles of Paul, read a few sentences with faith, and received his new life in Christ. The witness of Christian biography and the reading of Scripture united to convert this man's troubled soul to Christ on that important day.

In the same way, my friend, please, take some time daily to read your Bible. Then, take some more time and read other edifying books. Especially, read what Christians have learned about the Word of God in the power of the Spirit of God for the glory of the Father. Be encouraged, my friend, as you journey toward the visible presence of God through this life of tribulation and trial: Read on, Christian, read on!

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