

“A Christian’s Books” No. 1 Introduction
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Years ago I prepared a list of “Desert Island Books” at the request of several who had wanted to know what I considered essential reading for an English-speaking Christian. It was, as all such lists must be, idiosyncratic. It reflected my own experience, my own tastes, and my own understanding of what makes a book valuable. My list would not be the same; it would very different from the list prepared by other widely read ministers. My list contained undoubted classics that anyone could be sure would prove valuable to a serious Christian – Augustine’s *Confessions*; Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; á Kempis’ *Imitation of Christ*; and Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* – but it also included books that would likely be much more interesting to a minister like myself than to a Christian layman, for example the *Memoirs* of the 17th century Scottish pastor and theologian Thomas Boston; not an easy book to read though it generously repays the hard work!

I am fully aware that not all Christians are avid readers. Education, temperament, and family culture differ and each has a powerful effect upon the ease, the pleasure, and the anticipation with which a person picks up a book to read. But from the very beginning Christianity has been a reading faith. No one whose faith has been nurtured by reading has any difficulty understanding that the Apostle Paul, in the last great crisis of his life, longed to have his books brought to him (2 Timothy 4:13). It is in reading that any Christian can enjoy the fellowship of the best minds and hearts that have adorned the life of the church through her history. Who would not want to have Augustine or Luther or Calvin or Bunyan to be his or her pastor? What Christian would not want to sit down and have a conversation about the Christian faith and life with one of the church’s wisest or noblest men or women? Well, it is just this fellowship with great and godly minds that reading makes possible.

And multitudes of Christians will confess that it was in reading a book that they came to understand the gospel, or that they gained some important insight into the Christian faith and life, or that they were inspired to live more devotedly to the glory of the Lord. Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* was read by men and women in the early church and, perhaps more than any other single instrument, inspired multitudes to devote their lives to the service of Christ. Augustine tells us in his *Confessions* that reading that book inspired him to forsake the world and to devote himself wholly to the service of Christ. Jonathan Edwards’ edition of the *Diary of David Brainerd* had a similar effect: perhaps sending more men and women into missionary service than any other human means. Stephen Neill, in his *A History of Christian Missions*, perfectly encapsulates the lasting and continuing effect of such a great book when he writes of Brainerd’s *Diary*, “Brainerd died, but lived on in the lives of those, like William Carey and Henry Martyn, who found inspiration in his impassioned words.” What Christian would not want David Brainerd “living on” in him? The spiritual power of Christian literature is wonderfully illustrated in these “links in the chain.” Richard Sibbes’ *Bruised Reed* (1630) gave Richard Baxter “a livelier apprehension of the mystery of redemption.” Baxter’s own *Call to the Unconverted* (1657) was instrumental in the salvation of Richard Doddridge.

Doddridge's *Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul* (1745) brought William Wilberforce to Christ. Wilberforce's *Practical View of the Prevailing Religious System of Professed Christians... Contrasted with Real Christianity* (1797) opened the heart of Thomas Chalmers to the gospel. It was Chalmers' conversion that represented a turning point in the fortunes of Scottish Christianity in the early 19th century. McCheyne and the Bonars were his students and disciples. I have read all those books and each of them still speaks with real power today and no doubt has through the centuries been a great blessing to multitudes of other Christians. In our time small books like John Stott's *Basic Christianity* and John Blanchard's *Right with God* or C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* have been used to bring thousands of people to Christ.

But, of course, some books are better than others. A lot of rot has also been communicated to Christian minds and hearts through the reading of books! What is more, books are valuable in different ways. Some merely entertain, which is certainly not a bad thing in its place. Some educate us about matters relatively unimportant. We have all read books of that type. Some instruct us about very important things – things touching God, Holy Scripture, salvation, and our lives in this world – but do not necessarily inspire and are not terribly easy to read. I have used to great profit many books of that kind. I prepare my sermons week by week using books of that kind. Other books instruct and inspire; the very best kind of book.

In this series of articles I plan to introduce you to a variety of great books, books of very different kinds treating a wide range of subjects, but books that will help you as a Christian. My purpose is not to make you scholars, but to make you deeper and wiser Christians and to give you the same thrill that I have felt in encountering the truth of God beautifully, skillfully, and winsomely portrayed.

I will concentrate on older books, not because nothing of value is being written today. That most certainly is not the case! One of the most inspiring books I have ever read is the brand new title by the Englishman Don Stephens, *War and Grace*, a book from which I read a substantial excerpt Easter Sunday evening in 2006. I am always coming across good books. Recently in a Sunday School class here at Faith, Dr. Samuel Hsu of Philadelphia mentioned the famous piano technician, Franz Mohr. Mohr prepared and tuned pianos for all the great pianists of the 20th century. Mohr was a devout Christian and there is book about him that I had never heard of, in fact co-authored by Edith Schaeffer. I secured a copy and I will read it as soon as Florence lets me have it! I am reading the book second hand already as my wife is enjoying it so much that she can't refrain from repeating its stories to me. You will no doubt hear some of them in upcoming sermons!

We live in a favored time in this, that so many great books are available in inexpensive editions. My life, in many respects, has been shaped by the books I have read. I look forward to sharing some of them with you.