

“A Christian’s Books” No. 4 Autobiography
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We have so far considered books of church history and Christian biography. There is a third class of books that belongs with these first two, books that are likewise a window on the church’s past *and* an account of an individual Christian life. These are the great library of Christian autobiography. Autobiography comes in different forms: actual memoirs, journals intended for publication, diaries that may never have been intended for publication, and still others. Perhaps the two greatest Christian books ever written, at least as measured by their genius and their influence through the ages, are Augustine’s *Confessions* and John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Both are autobiographies, though the former more obviously so than the latter. Bunyan’s three greatest books are all the story of his own life: *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, an actual memoir; *The Holy War*, the account of his spiritual experience under the image of the conquest and then defense of the city of Mansoul; and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, the same story as an account of a pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Bunyan informs his readers that it is the same story that is being told in *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *Grace Abounding* by including in both several sections that are the same virtually word for word. It goes without saying that any well-read Christian should read both the *Confessions* (at least the first ten books, which books comprise the actual autobiography, and in a good translation, especially the new one by Henry Chadwick) and *Pilgrim’s Progress* more than once. Spurgeon is said to have read *Pilgrim’s Progress* more than fifty times and Alexander Whyte suggested that this was one thing in which he had done the great London preacher better!

But there is no end of great autobiographies. Some of them have been immensely influential. The journals or diaries of David Brainerd, the early colonial missionary to Native Americans of Massachusetts and New Jersey, were after his death edited and published by Jonathan Edwards as *An Account of the Life of David Brainerd*. The book is mostly Brainerd not Edwards; hence it deserves to be treated as an autobiography. It became one of the seminal works of what we today know as the modern missionary movement, the enterprise that, in time and by God’s grace, has completely shifted Christendom’s center of gravity from Europe and North America to the two-third’s world. The number of men and women who decided upon a missionary life after reading Brainerd is very large. Be careful what you read! A modern work of the same type – diaries published posthumously – is *The Journals of Jim Elliot*, edited by the martyred missionary’s wife Elisabeth. They make inspiring reading for a Christian young person wanting to live his or her life for the Lord.

Autobiographies, of course, do not always cover the author’s entire life. *Grace Abounding* covers only the early life, conversion, and early Christian experience of John Bunyan (the first edition was published 22 years before his death, though subsequent editions added some later detail). C.S. Lewis’ wonderful *Surprised By Joy* takes his story only through his conversion. Thomas Boston’s *Memoir*, on the other hand, begins with his birth in 1676 and includes a remarkable few pages near the end describing the great

Scottish pastor's end of life self-examination! Nor are these self-narrated *Lives* by any means the same. Edith Schaeffer's *The Tapestry* is a rambling narrative that tells the Schaeffer story in detail. The Roman Catholic Frenchwoman Elisabeth Leseur's story of her difficult life married to a spiritually hostile husband (who converted after her death, eventually entered the priesthood, and later published her diaries as an act of personal devotion!) is almost entirely an account of inner reflection. *My Spirit Rejoices* is a great read for the discerning Reformed woman! Andrew Bonar's *Diary* is a combination of both narrative and reflection and is a very valuable book for its encouragement in the life of faith.

Some autobiographies are tough sledding but repay the work. I think here of a book such as the *Memoirs* of James Fraser of Brea, the Scottish covenanter, a book so full of rich spiritual matter that Alexander Whyte preached a series of evening sermons on it that was later published as a book! Other autobiographies read like a novel. I'm thinking of one of the literary masterpieces of the 20th century, Sheldon Vanauken's *A Severe Mercy*. This is the story of a young couple's romance, their finding Christ while studying at Oxford, her subsequent and early death, and the crisis of faith this caused for her devastated husband. C.S. Lewis exerted an influence upon their coming to faith and included in the book are some of his letters to Sheldon that include what have become some of his most famous statements in recommendation of the Christian faith. If you have not read Vanauken you have a treat in store!

One must exercise some discernment, of course, in reading any autobiography. There is the inevitable temptation for the diarist or autobiographer to present himself or herself in a better light than is warranted or, in some cases, in a worse light. Robert Murray McCheyne once left off keeping a diary for that very reason: he felt it was a temptation to his pride. On the other hand, the realities of creation, fall, and redemption are all wonderfully and very helpfully depicted in every individual Christian life if only one has eyes to see. The whole grand scheme of biblical truth is confirmed in your own life every day. *You* are the proof of the Bible if only you pay attention to your experience! Those who pay the closest attention to that experience are often those, indeed usually those who write it down. And then, of course, every life is connected to every other, at least in the plan and purpose of God. It was this fact that led Alexander Whyte to say in a sermon, "...each individual life, had we courage to feel it, is the centre of the whole providential scheme. Had you, had I, lent to us the gift of divine intelligence, we would see all life radiating from our own souls. Every life is the centre and key of the great whole." Every single life in our congregation is worth an autobiography, would be a story usefully told for the benefit of others, if only each man and each woman thought carefully about his or her life as a Christian walking with God and wrote down those thoughts in clear English. We tend to think of our lives as too small to be of any real importance, but the living God is in our lives making them what they are! We are all, every one of us, *en route* to positions of immortal greatness. Think of what your life would teach others if well observed and well written: the faithfulness of God, the difficulty of salvation, the great challenge of offering the Lord a holy life, the adventure of faith and prayer, and all the rest. Perhaps few would be published, but writing down your life in the form of a diary, a reflection written before God day by day, might not only at last prove a blessing for

yourself and your loved ones; though it will surely be that! Think of our beloved elder Ken Anderson's autobiographical account, published for his family near the end of his faithful life. Boston wrote his *Memoir* for his children and it has been the blessing of thousands upon thousands ever since! One great benefit of reading autobiographies is that they tend to inspire the Christians who read them to write their own. Keeping a journal has always been an important means of living a more reflective, serious, and spiritually interested life.

So mused I silently, as o'er and o'er
I turned the wrinkled pages lying round,
The well-worn relics of long-buried years,
Which rise to life again in every page;
Brief memories of love, and grief, and peace,
With glimpses of still unforgotten scenes; –
Face and names of former days are here.