

The Perils and Values of Reading

By Geraint Fielder

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The greatest of dangers is to play off intellectual culture against spiritual fervour - we need them both

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There are two verses in the New Testament which highlight the battle for the mind of man; a battle which was going on in the days of the Apostles and is going on today; a battle which shows clearly the power of the written Word.

The first verse brings to us a poignant picture. Paul the Apostle is imprisoned; he is writing his second letter to Timothy - a message that proved to be his last words on paper. 'When you come' he says to Timothy, 'bring the cloak that I left at Troas, also the books and above all the parchments' [2 Tim 4.13].

We do not know if these books and parchments ever reached him. He had just written, 'The time of my departure is at hand', and it may have come sooner than he had expected. We do not know what these books and parchments were. Very probably a copy of the Old Testament; almost certainly copies of Paul's own epistles together with the recorded acts and words of Christ.

Whatever the books were we can certainly deduce from this verse that books were precious to Paul. His request for them was virtually the last written request he made. His actual last request is also a moving one. 'Do your best to come before winter'. He would need the warmth of that cloak; he would value the spiritual ministry of those books in the long winter nights.

We can imagine him musing over a copy of his letter to the Romans. About to be sacrificed he would read again those words that the Spirit of God had quickened from his mind. 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword) No! in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.'

Those books and parchments were precious to him. What they represent is precious to us too for we know their power. That one brief book, the Epistle to the Romans, is spiritual dynamite. No book has ever so changed men and shaped the course of the world. Augustine, Luther, John Wesley - these are just three of the men who have stamped their mark on history after finding Jesus Christ in the Epistle to the Romans.

The second verse also reminds us of the power of books - evil books, sinister books. 'And a number of these who practised magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all.' [Acts 19.19].

The words of error also wield a fearful power over men's lives. The tempter in the garden seemed to speak more powerfully than did the Lord God. And so it seems in our day. In the torrent of words that comes from Radio and T.V., the press, paperbacks and learned volumes, the still small voice seems hardly to be heard. Witness the effect of 'The Thoughts of Mao' - a vast sub-continent held in their sway.

The battle of words! Acts 19.20 completes the picture however. 'So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.'

My first observations have regard to the perils of reading or how not to regard books.

1 Beware the antiquarian mentality. That attitude which says 'the older is better.' Sometimes this degenerates into valuing old books simply as collector's pieces.

2 Beware too the mentality which says 'What's newest is truest'. Always waiting to see what the latest book on so and so says before making your mind up and so never making it up.

3 Beware the acquiring mentality. This produces tremendous bookcase consciousness; it breeds more of a concern about the number of books you have than the number you have read. Some people have 'books on the brain' and that is a disease. It is getting 'books into the brain' that produces growth.

4 Beware the escapist mentality. It is an awfully frustrating thing to live with a person who runs from the problem of the moment to the book of the moment and never comes to grips with either.

5 Beware - the greatest danger that besets the man who loves books - the borrowed thoughts mentality. There are people whose bookishness is a substitute for, rather than a stimulus to their own thinking. It is not insignificant that this mentality often goes with spiritual barrenness.

Necessarily my next observations have to do with the values of reading or how we should read books.

1 Read reflectively. Combine reading with meditation; the two ought never to be put asunder. Think as well as read and always keep the thinking proportionate to the reading. If we just gorge ourselves with book-matter we become mentally dyspeptic. A little girl was once asked whether she knew what her soul was. 'Sir, my soul is my think' was her reply. Mr Spurgeon comments, 'If that be correct, some persons have very little soul.'

2 Read representatively. To read wisely is to read widely. Don't fall into the groove of one type of book; not always doctrine, nor always missionary biographies or devotional books - but some of each. Check the ground you cover by looking through a guide to Christian reading to see where there are gaps.

3 Read regularly and not fitfully. A little but often, like oiling a bike. Give yourself a flexible goal over a period of time so that you read purposefully.

Some of us read like the roaming of a little dog over the moors sniffing at everything but catching nothing. [There is the wag of approval and the bark of dissent but no time is given to digesting]. Acquire the habit of persevering every day with something until it is mastered. You will be surprised at what you have acquired at the end of twelve months.

4 Read for relaxation as well as for information. Return to old favourites, as you return again and again to a well-loved holiday place for refreshment.

5 Read above yourself sometimes. Continually reading easy books is the hardest way of learning. Don't only graduate from milk and water to milk but get some condensed milk sometimes. Read books of stature that mould you. To tackle great books may require

the perseverance of Jacob. He wrestled with an angel all night and counted himself better for the bout though the sinews of his thigh shrank in consequence.

6 Read for perspective. Discover the inter-relationship between different subjects. This is a mark of an educated Christian mind.

If you study a doctrine, study the history of the doctrine as well. This will show you how Christians have always had to contend with non-Christian thinking in the church; it will show you how our forefathers were prepared to die for the truths we hold; e.g. when studying Man read Augustine; or the Atonement read Anselm; or Justification by Faith read Luther; or the Holy Spirit read Whitefield, Wesley, Edwards.

7 Read the Bible more the older you grow as a Christian rather than less. I fear sometimes that the tendency is the opposite. Wesley in the latter part of his life resolved to be a man of one book - the Bible. 'Be monopolized by the Bible' says Spurgeon 'and you will be made mighty through it'. It was said of Bunyan, 'Prick him anywhere and his blood would flow bibline.'

The principle of the Reformation was 'The Scripture alone'. Authority belongs to the Bible - it is a sword like that of Goliath of which David said, 'There is none like it'. And yet remember that these same reformers, who wielded mightily the sword of the Scriptures, were the quickest of men to use the printing presses to write and circulate books throughout Europe. The greater we value the Scriptures the greater we shall value those books which cast light on the Scriptures and spread the message of the Scriptures.

8 Read about the great men of God and be challenged to read more by the way they read.

The greatest of dangers is to play off intellectual culture against spiritual fervour - we need them both. The great men of God had both in a large measure. We pray regularly that God will raise up again giants like those of the past. Were they better than we are because they had less learning? Were they more zealous as godly men because they were less industrious as students? Let me mention something of four men whose credentials I have no need to lay before you: Richard Baxter, John Owen, Matthew Poole and Joseph Alleine.

Richard Baxter gives us a passage in which he talks about the variety of his studies, 'I have looked over Hutten, Vivers, Erasmus, Scaliger, Salmasius, Casauban and many other critical grammarians and all Gruter's critical volumes. I have read almost all the physic and metaphysics I could hear of . . . I despise none of their learning; all the truth is useful. Mathematics which I have least of, I find a pretty manlike sport. . . I much value the methodical sobriety of Aquinas, the subtlety of Scotus and Ockham, the plainness of Durandus, the solidity of Arminiensis, the profundity of Bradwardine and their followers'. This from a preacher of compassion and power with an enormous pastoral heart.

Matthew Poole while preparing his commentary, which occupied him for ten years, rose every morning between 3 and 4 o'clock, worked till eight, then ate a raw egg, worked again until 12, had another raw egg and returned to his desk till late afternoon.

John Owen, the most massively erudite of all the Puritans, was for six years Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University. During several years of his university life he allowed himself only 4 hours sleep and kept himself fit by athletics. In fact so fit was he that he once seized with his own hands a rebellious student and carried him off to prison to the amazement of the other dons who had rushed to protect him.

Joseph Alleine after he was married received a letter of congratulations from an old college friend who had similar intentions and wished Alleine would advise him on the inconvenience of married life. Alleine replied, 'Thou wouldst know the inconvenience of married life, I will tell thee. First, whereas thou risest constantly at 4 a.m., she will keep thee till six; secondly, whereas thou usest to study 14 hours a day, she will bring thee to 8 or 9; thirdly, whereas thou art want to forebear one meal at least in the day for thy studies, she will bring thee to thy meat. If these are not mischief enough to affright thee, I know not what thou art.'

So those of you who have ambitions to read all the books in the Evangelical Library, beware of a beguiling wife who will cruelly rob you of the joys of early rising, fasting, and 14 hours, reading or study a day!

The point of this excursion into the study habits of our forefathers is to remind you that these were men of spiritual muscle and fibre - extraordinary preachers and profound teachers whose studies helped their preaching and whose ardour was not damped by study.

'An address given at the Evangelical Meeting of the Cardiff Branch of the Evangelical Library in May 1969. Geraint Fielder is a retired minister who has written a history of the Forward Movement in Wales entitled, Grit, Grace and Gumption (Christian Focus)