

Reading for Christian Growth

By Clark Blanchard

- *What place does reading have for a Christian?*
- *What supportive resources exist?*
- *How can I develop good Christian reading habits?*

God's Book

The primary reason we have such excellent and detailed information about God's interventions in human history is because men wrote it down and preserved it. Verbal legends and folk tales change in the telling over time, but the written Word can provide a stable record. Of course, the idea to write it all down wasn't man's idea, not even Moses' idea. It was God's idea (Exodus 17:14; 34:1, 27; Deuteronomy 10:2; 17:18; and Romans 15:4).

Think how much better the written Word has been, and still is, at preserving and communicating God's truth than any other approach, especially over the long haul. By contrast, consider how religious institutions waffle and change with time and circumstances.

When Christ came, some 1500 years after the Law was written, He compared the teachings found in the written Word with those of the various Jewish institutional groups, like the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. Not one of the institutions had it right—not even close.

We have now come along some 2,000 years after the New Testament was written and experience a similar thing. Which "Christian" institution could we believe, and how would we ever know for sure, if we did not have the written Word? We're reminded of what Isaiah wrote, *To the Law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them* (Isaiah 8:20). We need to thank God daily for His wisdom in choosing the media of the printed page as custodian of His great truths for us.

Choosing the printed page has not been without its struggles and costs. Think about the people who have given their lives, both in life and death, over the centuries, so that we could have a copy of God's Word for our very own, in a language we can read. It was not always so. Think about the genius of Gutenberg's invention of printing that has made Bibles available at little or no cost and free from copyist errors. Think about the long hours of study and, in some cases, bold courageous sacrifice by language scholars down through history. Some gave their very lives.

The Wise Choice of Books

With the benefit of a long historical perspective, we can begin to see the wisdom of God in choosing the printed page—books. They first appeared as scrolls. Then, after the time of Christ, the "codex" or leaf-form was used, that is common today.

Currently, books pour off the presses at the staggering rate of 10 trillion per year worldwide. That's some 50 million tons of paper. Adding to this, some 8,000 to 9,000 newspapers raise the total to 130 million tons per year. That is equivalent to a pile of paper over 2,000 feet high. That's four times the height of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Books are alive and well. [Ref: "Gutenberg" by John Man, p. 4].

Because of our familiarity with books, we don't often think about their genius and significant advantages. For example, they can be used in any culture, during any time frame. The form is never obsolete. They can read to the right, to the left, or, if you're Chinese, they can read down. They are compact information packages. They're portable and store easily, even

aesthetically. They're very rugged, able to withstand severe shock, vibration, radiation, and temperature extremes—all of which go well beyond any computer. They can be read without any special equipment, and don't need power. They can include text, graphics, and pictures. They offer rapid random access to any part, and the only skill required is the ability to read. You can read at your own rate, reread them again anytime, take notes in them, and share them with a friend.

Presuppositions

However, God's use of the printed page presupposes two things. It presupposes that we are able to read and that we are willing to read. It is the "willingness" part that I wish to address.

Here I must confess that I don't like to read. I never have. My wife, on the other hand, loves to read. She reads her Bible faithfully and extensively. Plus, she consumes thick English novels on a regular basis ... for pleasure! But, for me, reading is work. I never read for pleasure—it's an oxymoron. Before I was a Christian, the only magazines I ever read had "Illustrated" somewhere in the title and a lot of pictures inside.

But Christ has changed that. I read a lot now, not because I like it, but it's a matter of obedience and necessary for spiritual growth. If you and I want to be men and women of God, we must be men and women of His Word. No way around it. It's His designated means of communication to us. But we have to be disciplined these busy days, set priorities, and regularly read God's Word to live by (Psalm 119:11).

Reading Challenge

Next, I want to challenge you to take another step in reading. Your spiritual life will benefit greatly if you develop the habit of also reading "around" the Bible. By this, I mean to read articles and especially books that grow your understanding of God's Word and biblical living. My key thought here is that it be through books. Sure, you may find a few helpful programs on TV and perhaps the internet, too. But here I am advocating books. Of course, we need to be discerning, whether it's the TV, internet, or the books we read (Ecclesiastes 12:9-14).

In the early days of TV, the common wisdom was that it would soon replace our libraries. Books would become obsolete. They didn't. Now we are going through the same mentality about computers and the Internet. They can be of some value, but they're not going to replace books. In fact, one of the more popular type Web sites is the on-line book sales, like Amazon.com.

Bookstores

Currently, retail bookstores are enjoying somewhat of a revolution in popularity. Former small dingy bookstores have given way to the large elaborate chains. They not only feature a very large selection, covering a wide range of interests, but also include music sales. For the customers' enjoyment, comfortable seating is scattered throughout the spacious store, in a homelike setting. And a snack bar is available for coffee and munchies. It's common for people to come and spend the entire day there.

Of special interest to us who belong to Christ are Christian bookstores. Most large to medium size cities in the United States have them. They're one of my favorite haunts.

Your Library

Further, I would encourage you to build your own personal resource library over time. It should include study aids, such as various translations, study Bibles, concordances, Bible dictionaries, commentaries, atlases, and a systematic theology set. Then add books of special biblical focus on subjects such as creation, prophecy, Bible languages, biblical geography, discipleship, evangelism, church history, cults, and so forth. Then consider Christian classics such as *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, *Mere Christianity*, and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Also, add biographies of great people, especially of Christians whom you admire. The list goes on. A good personal Christian library will not only greatly aid your spiritual growth but that of your family and those to whom you minister, as well.

The famous humanistic theologian Erasmus (1467-1536) wrote, “When I get a little money, I buy books; and if any is left, I buy food and clothes.” Well, that seems a little extreme to this guy who doesn’t even like to read, but we do need to take a clue from the wisdom of God in selecting the printed page as the best source of information for us.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What place does reading have for a Christian?*

A: God’s sole vehicle for communication to us is a book. Reading it and about it is essential to knowing Him and His will for us. It’s THE answer book that we must read.

Q: *What supportive resources exist?*

A: Many, including inexpensive Bibles in our own language, numerous books to aid in Bible study, a huge volume of peripheral Christian writings, Christian bookstores, and those who teach the Bible.

Q: *How can I develop good Christian reading habits?*

A: Set life priorities which include regular ample time for Bible reading and study. Read books “around” the Bible, and develop a personal Christian library.