

Reasons to Read

The purpose of a university education has become a subject of heated debate. Government cutbacks and the stress on education as a job-creation engine, a preparation for the market place is undermining the historic mandate of universities. In the past a university prepared men and women for professional careers, gave them a better appreciation of the arts, literature, history, and science. As an institution of "higher learning", a university helped students to enjoy richer, more meaningful lives. And this original purpose should be reaffirmed. A university ought to be a place, which equips people to think and to grow, to exchange ideas and get grounded in good books.

In the past we have always assumed that the best way to educate is through reading. But reading is in decline. In recent years I have met students who only read the assigned texts for their courses and no more. Our popular culture does not encourage reading habits. Many have become image watchers. Television viewing, videos and the internet have often replaced books and magazines.

Why read books? One doesn't read books just to relieve boredom while waiting in the doctor's office or when one can't fall asleep. C.S. Lewis once said that serious readers "are always looking for leisure and silence in which to read and do so with their whole attention." A book attempts to open doors and windows into another world, the world of other minds. It should not sit a shelf to collect dust. I have always considered the books in my personal library as my tools. They are handled, underlined, and marked with marginal jottings.

Reading is also in decline among average Evangelical and Reformed Christians. This is deplorable as they are the people of THE BOOK, the Bible. Martin Luther believed that printing was "God's highest and extremest act of Grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward." Dr. A.W. Tozer wrote that the effect of the printed page is so powerful that the reading of good books is not only a privilege but also an obligation, and the habitual reading of poor ones a tragedy. Christians ought to read with discernment, with faith and understanding. But not all Christian literature is worth reading. There is also cheap religious fiction, spirit-deadening literature, on the market. Tozer called it "shallow religious chop suey."

Dr. John H. Gerstner, a Reformed scholar, wrote, "Hundred years ago, many parishioners knew more theology than modern ministers, and the ministers of that time knew more than the specialists of today." A strong statement! Whether or not this is true is a matter for debate. But in bygone years, most homes had a few shelves with a good selection of books. Today, television and video viewing take away time from reading. Magazines and newspapers are still read. But our secular press presents us with a picture of life from which God is totally absent. Its value judgments are rooted and grounded in the thinking of this world. And in much popular journalism, and literature in general, there is a strong undercurrent of anti-Christian thought, undermining our value system.

The printed word had an enormous influence in the past and despite a decline in reading by the general public, it still influences the character of our personalities. Reformation Christians have always been people of the book. We have the Bible of course. Where would we be without its guidance and light? Throughout the centuries, God has used writers to expound the faith, to teach what the church is and what Christian morality is. As someone aptly said, "In a conspicuous manner the book has become a prominent tool for God's plan of salvation with the world."

We cannot imagine the Reformation without Martin Luther's 95 theses, which were pounded on the Wittenberg door. Within a short time they became a bestseller which moved the very foundations of the church.

And we cannot imagine Calvinism without John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This work still continues to be read and studied. More than ever, Christian books roll off the press. Now, in contemporary Christian publishing, much froth can be found. Some books have bad ideas. But rich spiritual nutrition can still be found amidst the chaff. Classics have been reprinted. New writers have come on the scene, who stimulate the mind and lead to a deeper awareness of God and His world. Harry Blamires wrote, "No Christian who has taken time to read religious books can deny that time after time a sentence has leaped out at him from the middle of a page to answer the gravest, the deepest need of the moment."

The invention of the computer has introduced one of the great scientific and technological adventures of all time, ranking in importance with the invention of writing and the printing press - all technologies that shape the mind. Children have to use computers at school. With the inroads of television, videos, and the computers, who still reads? Check how many books you have in your bookcase, the number of magazines that come into your home, and how often you use the local library.

Computers and television cannot replace reading. The written word fuels the imagination, develops the mind and broadens the vision for the world. Through reading the mind comes alive, it must create active images, thoughts and feelings. There are various forms of reading: leisure reading, strictly for relaxation and entertainment; informative literature, study materials, keeping you up-to-date with what is happening in the world, our nation, church, education, etc. Informative reading is more of a search for questions and answers. This is quite distinct from devotional reading. In devotional reading we have a choice between contemporary and ancient writings. For example, *The Love of God* by Bernard of Clairveaux (1090-1153), is voice of the past but still a spiritual classic, a blessing for the soul. Just recently I read a contemporary devotional, *Disappointment with God*, by Philip Yancey, a well known American Christian author. This book deals with suffering and pain. It is a modern commentary on the questions Job struggled with. Such reading cannot be done hurriedly. It requires a meditative spirit. It is meant to feed the mind, to fortify the will, to stir the soul. And, of course, as God's people we are readers of His inscripturated Word - The Bible. Though we live in a computer age, we cannot do without reading. As Allen Emerson and Cheryl Forbes pointed out in their book, *The Invasion of the Computer Culture*: "The cumulative effect of reading the Bible day after day in all kinds of circumstances makes a strong

statement: this is where we stand, and these are the words we live by no matter what the situation."

Bible reading is fundamental for spiritual growth and intellectual development. But I also believe Christians should read widely. My reading included theology, philosophy, ethics, apologetics, politics, church history, history of missions, "secular" history and devotional books. I have been challenged by biographies telling the story of a missionary and autobiographies. And I believe the Christian classics ought to be dusted off. They possess the qualities of sincerity, sound theology, beauty of style, and timelessness. The early church fathers, the reformers and the puritans have thought through many issues and questions we are facing. We can learn from their teachings and their walk with God. Cultivate good reading habits. Your selection of books will either hinder or help you in your spiritual pilgrimage. The counsel of Thomas a. Kempis (c.1380-1471) is still applicable for our times.

All men naturally desire knowledge, but what availeth knowledge without the fear of God? If I understand all things in the world, and had not love, what would it avail in the sight of God, who will judge me according to my deeds? ...If thou knewest the whole Bible by heart and all the sayings of all the philosophers, what would it profit thee without the love of God and without grace? Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, except to love God, and Him only to serve.

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