

To Read a Book: a Gift From God

Have you read any good books lately? Are you using your leisure time wisely? I wouldn't know the answer of course. But judging by many comments about the use of leisure time, I presume that visual sources of information and entertainment do have a more prominent place in your life than reading.

It is one of the paradoxes of our time that man, in his nearly reckless search for ways to spend his leisure hours, has very little eye for the wealth of knowledge, insight, beauty and rest available in a good book. Reading can be such a liberating activity when you let yourself be open for the printed word and absorb spiritually what is presented.

The modern reader, however, is more out for quick reading - the popular magazine, condensed books and stories. You even have the "one evening" condensed book on the market. And the more pictures in a magazine the better it sells. Real readers have become rare. Perhaps they will become an extinct species.

A decade ago, communications systems designer Sol Cornberg, a radical prophet in the field of library technology, declared that reading would soon cease to be a primary form of information. "Reading and writing," he suggested "will become obsolete skills."

The Baptist theologian Harvey Cox believes that the post-literary age has begun. And this new stage in history will also have a strong influence upon future spiritual developments. What is ahead for Protestantism, the religion of the book par excellence? According to Cox, it means the reduction of Protestantism to the ever decreasing minority of readers, "unless it makes room within itself for other means of communication."

Cox touches a weak spot in modern Protestantism. Many Protestants are no longer avid readers and consequently are less informed about their faith and the issues of our time than Protestants of previous generations were of theirs.

In his Confessions, St. Augustine speaks of "the spacious palaces of memory." It is a wonderful phrase, suggesting Christian responsibility for furnishing the mind. The mind should be fed by good literature. Even amid the moral corruption of our day, some great and worthwhile books are being written. Good secular reading materials, including some outstanding magazines, do give us a broad orientation of what is going on in the "secular mind."

Of course, the great Christian classics should never be forgotten. Christians should know and digest them. Christianity will become a flight into mysticism if it leaves its intellectual moorings, forgets the great Christian thinkers of the past and present, and is no longer interested in the basic problems faced by our generation.

The British revivalist John Wesley, whose preaching and ministry made such a wonderful impact upon England and the United States, enjoined upon all his ministers

the necessity of spending "at least five hours in twenty-four reading the most useful books." He warned them, too, that one could "never be a deep preacher" without extensive reading, "anymore than a thorough Christian."

Wesley considered his ministry of writing as important as his ministry of preaching. He also insisted that his ministers mastered deep and difficult books. He wanted to have an informed following. His converts read and studied his numerous tracts and books. Wesley himself was well acquainted with the Christian and secular classics. He practised what he preached.

Dr. W.G.T. Shedd challenged ministers to pass by all second-rate authors and devote their time to the first rate. He suggested a range of reading from Homer to the latest in theology. Dr. Billy Graham said, when addressing some 600 ministers in London, England, in November, 1970, that if he had his ministry all over again he would study three times as he had done.

Good books are friends to be treasured. Sir Winston Churchill owned many beautiful and precious things, but his most prized possessions were his books. He had a deep affection for a book as a thing of worth and beauty quite distinct from what he might think about its contents.

He once wrote: "If you cannot read all your books, at any rate handle, or as it were, fondle them - peer into them, let them fall open where they will, read from the first sentence that arrests the eye, set them back on their shelves with your own hands, arrange them on your own plan so that if you do not know what is in them, you at least know where they are. Let them be your friends: let them at any rate be your acquaintances."

Let us get back to some good and solid reading. And the greatest reading material available is still the Bible, the Word of the Living God. This Book of books should be read daily. Of course, only the man who knows the Christ of The Book will be able to penetrate its depth and come to know its message. Without faith in the Lord it will remain a closed book even when you read it for hours.

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January, 1974