

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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The Pastor and Books

By CARL A. EBERHARD

IT was Dr. Herbert H. Farmer of Cambridge, England, lecturing at the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville some years ago, who told of a minister coming into his study one day and seeing a set of Goethe's works. He tapped them on the back and asked: "Any sermons in Goth?" It is a common temptation for pastors to make books a sort of pipeline for sermons. The inexorable demands of preaching Sunday after Sunday, while he still manages to carry out the complex schedule of the other six days of the week, drive many a pastor to the blue book on his shelf for homiletical relief. And if he does any other reading he is likely to be asking the same question as Dr. Farmer's visitor. In a way this is not too bad, for a pastor's first work is preaching. To produce some 50 or 60 sermons in the course of a year is no small task. It amounts to writing a good-sized book each year. But for this very reason, because the pastor is of necessity a man of letters, writing and speaking much, he must read and study to sustain an effective preaching ministry. Preaching without reading soon makes an empty man. Input must balance output.

Right here we are faced with a dilemma. Today as never before the pastor's time is taken up by multifarious duties. His reading must be crowded in between many other obligations to which his time is already totally committed. And yet today as never before, we need a well-read, cultured ministry. Universal education has almost reached the college level. The people who make up our congregations

are more literate than they were a generation ago, and so is the public—in spite of Madison Avenue's attempts to convince Americans that they have midget minds and should dwell in a vast mental wasteland and be content with soaps, cereals, and cigarettes. Even if this accusation were half true, our clear responsibility as pastors is not to leave people where they are but to lead them up to a maximal use of whatever gifts they have received from God. To lead we must be at least one step ahead.

Of course culture is more than reading books. It requires intercourse with living persons, especially with those whose mind and character can enrich our own. Happy is the minister who is able to attend classes, or at least occasional lectures, at a seminary or university all the days of his life! Not for the purpose of piling up credits and degrees, nor for the purpose of getting material for immediate use in sermons, but to get a keener knowledge of men and women and of the deep things of God that will help to make him a good minister of Jesus Christ.

Culture also includes a good acquaintance with the fine arts. It is not only for our own enjoyment that we pastors should cultivate good taste. All of us are involved more or less in the arts—architecture, painting, sculpture, and the crafts, as we take part in the building of churches and schools or in using them. And there is the wonderful world of good music, Luther's favorite art. While we rejoice in the beauty of Beethoven's symphonies, sonatas, and quartettes, Mozart's concertos, Schu-

bert's Lieder, and a host of other fine works, we must ask: Is there a Lutheran pastor with soul so dead who never to himself has said (as does my mentor in music appreciation, Gerhard Herz): I love to bathe myself in Bach?

For most of us, however, the main source of culture will remain in books. If we cannot attend classes and lectures, we can read *books* recommended to students. We may not be able to visit Chartres, the fine parish churches of England, the famous museums of Europe and America. But with the modern means of reproduction in photography and color printing we can enjoy much of the world's art in *books*, enriching our lives with experiences that only a few wealthy people could enjoy until quite recently. If we cannot get to concerts often, this library and our own will surely contain *recordings* of the world's fine music.

Books, then, are the tools of our vocation. Using them in the right way will enlarge us both in understanding the Gospel and in understanding people, for better service. This requires effort on our part leading to the right kind of self-discipline and also to a truly educated personality. For we should be examples of the product of true Christian education, people who are continuously using all the gifts of God with the highest efficiency and for the highest goals in the most humble manner. The uncultured minister comes under suspicion as to his own religious life, for it is a Scriptural injunction that exhorts us as well as all Christians not to remain in the school of Simple Simon but to go on toward maturity, rejoicing in God our *Creator* as well as our Savior. A seminary is only the starter in this process. We do

not complete our education at the seminary. It has its theological beginning there, but if it stops when we receive our diploma, the seminary fails in its purpose. If we would be truly educated men, we must continue the process of learning as long as we live. And this is the great service which a library such as this can render to the church. Books are the distilled wisdom of the ages. Here in this place are assembled, and will continue to be assembled, a great many treasures. They need only to be used in the proper way to enrich our lives so that we may enrich others.

Dr. Mortimer Adler calls books "dead teachers." He is praising books, not condemning them, for his point is that books go on teaching even after their authors are dead. To sit at the feet of a great living teacher is a rare privilege, for there are not many great teachers in any age. Then, too, in our educational system we are not free to choose most of our teachers. But in the choice of books there is great freedom. Here most of the great teachers of all ages can be met. We can have them with us all the time. If we must leave them they patiently wait for us to come back. If we are dull of comprehension they will gladly repeat until we catch on. They will stand neglect, external abuse, criticism, being relegated to the bottom shelf, yet there they are—always ready to serve us. Oh, books are good friends and teachers! But not all of them. Since books are the reflection of the people who write them and since publishers (even ecclesiastical ones) are mostly interested in making money, book friends must be chosen with as much care as living friends. That is why one of the greatest services that living teachers

and friends can render is to introduce us to good books. The men on the faculty of this institution are always doing this, in the classroom and in their writings, especially with respect to theological books.

I should like to use this opportunity to enlist your interest in a more general way in books. The danger of higher education's becoming too professionalized and too specialized is quite generally recognized. Deans in medical, engineering, and law graduate schools deplore the illiteracy among their students. They used to be indignant about it, now they accept it as a sorry fact of academic life. Even businessmen are concerned. I have a son who is an architect by profession. He is also a Sloan Fellow and teaches at MIT. Sloan Fellows are promising young business executives sent by the larger corporations for special training in administration or management. The course my son teaches is not in architecture or even in business management. It is a reading course. These are some of the 13 books read in one semester: Becker, *The Declaration of Independence*; *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*; Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*; De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*; Cozzens, *Guard of Honor*. The class reads these books together, not for information but for understanding, getting acquainted with the world of ideas that helped make America and that shape it still. Business executives today are expected to be interested in more than their own little world of markets, sales, prices, products, profit and loss. Shouldn't we learn to expand our horizons?

Moreover, if we view the general cultural situation surrounding us, we must recognize the fact that we are confronted

by a civilization and culture which is becoming increasingly pagan and secular. Yet it is impregnated by Christian values. Elton Trueblood calls it a cut flower civilization. That is, we still enjoy some of the Christian flowers (monogamy, hospitals, community service, universal public education), but we are cut off from the roots which produce the flowers. Consider the secularization of contemporary literature, science, arts, including films, which fashion culture in an unconscious way. Here is a pretty complete departure from the Christian view of the true meaning of life. Secular humanism, with a strong mixture of science, has promoted not only a vague optimistic belief in the upward movement of man but also, because of its apparent failure, pessimism. People inside and outside the church are influenced by these movements and are confused. Many Christians are not aware that there is a problem at all. But Christian pastors ought to be aware of what is going on, and they ought to indicate to their people the meaning of the struggle. Van Wyck Brooks says: "If ours is a demented world as many think, we should sympathize with its feelings while retaining our faith and reason, as a sane visitor in a mental hospital shares the feelings of a patient while retaining his own mental health."¹ Being in the world we need not be of it. To understand our world, however, we need a broader perspective than that of our immediate occupation and age.

The Christian, especially the Christian pastor, lives in the light of eternity. This prevents him from falling into the trap

¹ Quoted in *Saturday Review* (Jan. 4, 1958) from *From a Writer's Notebook* (Dutton, 1958).

of thinking that only the contemporary is good. In every age some proud minds have said, "We are the people, and wisdom shall die with us" (Job 12:2). Our age is no less proud than Job's. The implicit claim of omniscience is quite patent on all sides, not only in the daily press but in the smarty magazines both religious and secular and in the idolizing of "science" by a host of pseudointellectuals. Scared to death of being accused of using a cliché, or stereotype, many a preacher tries to become clever at the cost of being clear, freshly "contemporary" at the cost of being Scriptural. But "faith should not rest on man's cleverness but on the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5 Phillips). Perhaps each "take-over" generation is the "taken in" generation. Man, everywhere and in every age, faces the same unchanging questions, questions concerning his own nature, his universe, his fellowman, his God.

As theologians we know where to go for the answers to these profound questions of the human soul. Quite literally we are devoted to one Book, a very old Book, **THE BOOK OF BOOKS**. Let nothing be substituted for the Word of God. If you think that you don't have time to read books, you surely must find time to read your Bible. In a wide view all our other reading and study should only be contributory to our understanding of the *Scriptures*, the one infallible and inerrant source of truth. In this sense all our reading does head toward our sermons.

However, since the Bible itself is set in a literary context, I believe that reading general literature can make a good contribution here. But be sure to get off to a good start. My own experience indicates this. When I arrived in Louisville 35 years

ago, I decided to stretch my mental muscles by taking some classes at the University. On Dr. Theodore Graebner's suggestion my first choice was English literature in a summer course. It proved to be just another course. Thinking that a fuller course in a regular semester might prove more helpful, I enrolled in the fall term for Elizabethan English under a young instructor. That course was almost fatal. I didn't go near any "literature" for a long time. I switched to psychology and education courses, a safe distance from anything highly literary. Some years later, again at Southern Seminary, it was my good fortune to hear some lectures by a guest—Dr. "Billy" Phelps, Yale's great teacher of literature. Here was wisdom, enthusiasm, wit, and learning. My interest in literature revived. Ever since I have found delight, edification, and even homiletical help in drama, novels, poetry. For there is a large religious element in the great literature of the world.

Take drama for example. We were brought up to think that the theater is wicked. But the theater in some form of dramatic expression can be found in every age and in every part of the world. In nearly all cultures it can be traced to religious sources. There is an Egyptian play, written before 2000 B. C., based on the death and resurrection of Osiris. Greek drama originated in ceremonial worship of the god Dionysus 500 B. C. Under the Roman Empire the theater degenerated, and later, opposed by the Christian church, virtually disappeared. There was a break between classic and modern drama which originated in the church service ca. 1000. At Christmas and Easter priests dramatized

these events for people who could neither read nor understand Latin. The crowds swelled to such size on these occasions that the drama was taken to the cemeteries and then to the city square. In 1264 Urban IV established the Corpus Christi Festival. Being in the spring this festival lent itself to the favorable development of plays outdoors. In England the climax was reached when the whole Bible was dramatized in 40 short plays.

Modern comedy has a religious origin. It came straight from hell. The devil was the comedian and the most popular part of the pageant. In Oberammergau, where no humor is permitted in the Passion Play, the devil was expurgated in 1810. Original plays began with the introduction of a non-Biblical character, e. g., Noah's wife, in the mystery plays, which gave way to the morality plays in England. Then about the middle of the 16th century came the beginning of English comedy with Ralph Roister Doister, Gammer Gurton's Needle, etc., and soon the rise of drama to its climax in Shakespeare.

Dr. Phelps claimed that the King James Bible and the first folio Shakespeare were the two most exalted pieces of literature ever published. I am sure that you have found the religious element quite prominent in

. . . him
Whose insight makes all others dim:
A thousand poets pried at life,
And only one amid the strife
Rose to be Shakespeare! ²

(R. Browning: Christmas Eve)

In *Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, in *Falstaff* and

² "Christmas Eve," *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning*. The Modern Library (New York, 1934).

Touchstone, there is a revelation of the inner truth of human life beyond the power of philosophy to bestow. When teaching the difference between saying prayers and praying I like to quote from *Hamlet*:

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.

The novel, too, can enrich our understanding of human nature. Take Dickens. Santayana called him the greatest novelist. We may balk at his sentimentality at times, but he surely makes up for that with his brilliant creation of characters and his evocation of the sights, smells, and sounds of London. He writes of gravity as the French do of love. His good people are really good and his bad people really bad, but they are all real. The tragedy of human life, its goodness, its humor, is given us in rich measure. Tolstoy is another great novelist of religious significance. His *Anna Karenina*, e. g., presents the conflict of good and evil in real people. His *War and Peace*, an almost interminable story of the Napoleonic Wars, records his philosophy of history from time to time. I find Dostoevski more interesting. Follow the tortures of Raskolnikov's guilty conscience in *Crime and Punishment* or the arguments of the grand inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In preliminary notes for *The Idiot* the hero is sometimes referred to as "Prince Christ" by Dostoevski.

I have not read any modern, or "contemporary," novel which I thought was great (unless it is Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*). Once a year or so I yield to the feeling of seeing whether there is anything new and better. I buy one of the best sellers. Invariably I am

disappointed. Even much-touted authors like Hemingway and Faulkner I find unattractive. Others were so worthless that I burned them or discarded them with other trash to keep anybody else from wasting time on them. This is a lost generation. It has lost God. Maybe that is religiously significant. There are two authors I can recommend, Alan Paton (*Cry the Beloved Country* and *Too Late the Phalarope*) and R. C. Hutchinson, an Englishman who has written a series of novels, each with a different national setting and dealing with spiritual problems.

Then there is poetry. You will find more answers to fundamental human problems in poetry too than in science. Nothing could be more relative than scientific textbooks. They are outdated almost before publication. New editions of Shakespeare come out constantly, but who would think of improving him? There is fundamental truth that does not change. Poetry tells us this in its own way, transfiguring the common things of life. Some say that we should read poetry merely for enjoyment or inspiration. Perhaps that is so for some poetry. But there is more than beauty in poetry. There is truth. We all know this from our Lutheran hymns.

If I were to recommend one poet, it would be Robert Browning. Dr. Phelps calls him the most formidable ally of the Christian religion that ever appeared in English literature. You may not like him to begin with, but keep on reading, and you will profit immensely. His masterpiece is undoubtedly the 20,000-line *The Ring and the Book*. There is *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, a marvelous intellectual answer to the agnostic. *Rabbi Ben Ezra* opens with the lines:

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first
was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God:
see all, nor be afraid!"

A Death in the Desert tells about John the Baptist; *Abt Vogler* is the church musician. *Christmas Eve* is a narrative poem about worship in a small chapel on Christmas Eve 1849, worth any modern preacher's time.

One of my favorites is *An Epistle: Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish the Arab Physician*. It deals with the haunting doubt of the man who makes science his god: perhaps there is something to the Christian religion after all? Karshish, "the picker-up of learning's crumbs" is on a scientific journey. He writes this 22d epistle to Abib "all-sagacious in our art, breeder in me of what poor skill I boast." He sends greetings, three samples of true snake stone and one of another sort. His journey has brought him to Jericho, soon he will be in Jerusalem, but this night he is spending at Bethany. He wants to share with his teachers what he has discovered in Jewry—a special spider to cure falling sickness and a few other pieces of scientific knowledge. He is about to end his letter, then admits there is something else that "set me off a-writing first of all." Maybe it's the town's barrenness, or else the look of the man; the case has struck him as strange. Maybe it's a case of mania, subinduced by epilepsy. At any rate, "the man's own conviction rests
That he was dead (in fact, they buried him),
That he was dead and then restored to life

By a Nazarene physician of his tribe:
—'Sayeth, the same bade "Rise," and he
did rise."

Karshish goes on to say that he had investigated the case with the Jewish elders, found Lazarus to be 50 years old, in excellent health, not too much concerned with the goings on in the world around him.

. . . the especial marking of the man
Is prone submission to the heavenly will . . .
He will live, nay, it pleaseth him to live
So long as God please, and just how God
please.

He even seeketh not to please God more
(Which meaneth otherwise) than as God
please.

Karshish could not seek the Nazarene himself because he had been killed in a tumult years ago, accused of wizardry and rebellion, even of causing an earthquake. There are other imputations, lies, of course (after all Lazarus is stark mad), but take one:

This man so cured regards the curer then,
As — God forgive me — who but God
himself,

Creator and Sustainer of the world,
That came and dwelt in flesh on it awhile!
— Sayeth that such an one was born and
lived,

Taught, healed the sick, broke bread at his
own house,

Then died, with Lazarus by, for aught I know,
And yet was . . . what I said nor choose repeat,
And must have so avouched himself, in fact,
In hearing of this very Lazarus

Who saith — but why all this of what he
saith?

Why write of trivial matters, things of price
Calling at every moment for remark?

I noticed on the margin of a pool
Blue-flowering borage, the Aleppo sort,
Aboundeth, very nitrous. It is strange!

Karshish begs his master's pardon for being so prolix. He can't understand why this case has interested him so. Perhaps the journey's end, the weariness. . . . Well,

I send thee what is writ.

Regard it as a chance, a matter risked
To this ambiguous Syrian — he may lose,
Or steal, or give it thee with equal good . . .
farewell!

But not quite! He must add a postscript:

The very God! think, Abib; dost thou think?
So, the All-Great, were the All-Loving too —
So, through the thunder comes a human voice
Saying, "O heart I made, a heart beats here!
Face, my hands fashioned, see it in myself,
Thou hast no power nor mayst conceive of
mine;

But Love I gave thee, with myself to love,
And thou must love me, who have died for
thee!"

The madman saith He said so: it is strange.

The man of science is not omniscient and without the certainty of Christian faith is haunted by doubt and taunted by it.

Robert Frost put the same question somewhat differently in *A Reflex*:

Hear my rignarole.
Science stuck a pole
Down a likely hole,
And he got it bit.
Science gave a stab,
And he got a grab.
That was what he got.
"Ah," he said, "Qui vive,
Who goes there, and what
ARE we to believe?
That there is an It?"³

We could go on exhibiting example after example from biography and his-

³ From *In the Clearing* by Robert Frost. Copyright (c) 1962 by Robert Frost. Reprinted by permission of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

tory, philosophy and science. But our time is limited. So we must hasten to conclude. How many books shall we read? How many books can we read? Van Wyck Brooks says: "A supposedly well-informed journalist has written that Hitler read most of the 7,000 military books in his library. So Lawrence of Arabia was said to have read at Oxford most of the 40,000 books in the library of his college. So Thomas Wolfe allegedly devoured 20,000 books or so. . . . How tiresome, all this, and how untrue! People speak of these things very much at their ease. For the last 20 years I have been obliged to read on an average of six or seven hours a day. I have certainly read far more than these others have had time for, in the short periods referred to, and how many books have I read in these 20 years? Something less than 6,000, I think, less than a book a day." Quoted in *Saturday Review* (Jan. 4, 1958), from *From a Writer's Notebook* (Dutton, 1958)

The number of books that we can read will depend somewhat on how we read them. Bacon says: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." We shall read in a different way and at a different tempo when we read for entertainment, for information, or for understanding. Dr. Adler, who wrote *How to Read a Book*, says that he doesn't get through more than 20 books in a year, reading for understanding.

Not being able to read all the books in the world we shall have to budget our time and be quite selective. We can all manage some reading. We all do. But are we doing as much serious reading as we should? Louis Shores, dean of the

School of Library Training and Service, Florida State University, has figured out that if an average reader spends 15 minutes a day he will read 20 books a year. Sir William Osler was a very famous physician and medical professor. His greatness is attributed not only to his profound medical knowledge but also to his broad general education. He was a very busy man. Dr. Harvey Cushing's biography of him covers over 1,300 pages. The first volume runs to 685 pages, up to the time when Osler left Johns Hopkins for Oxford. He was 55. He had only recently made a speech half facetiously quoting Trollope to the effect that men over 60 were rather useless and should be chloroformed. The second volume of the biography, covering Osler's life till the time of his death at 70, covers 686 pages, one more than it took to cover the first 55 years of his life! Osler's problem was the same as ours—how to find time to read. Rather early in life he made the rule that he would read the last 15 minutes before going to sleep, no matter what time it was. He never broke the rule, and therein lay his success as a reader. Perhaps we do better at some other part of the day and can find more than 15 minutes. Good books should hardly be used as soporifics. The point is regularity and system.

What about the selection of books? In each age there are a few great minds who have wrestled successfully with the deep problems of mankind. Their answers have been deposited for us in books. If it were not for books each generation would have to start out almost afresh, for oral tradition quickly deteriorates. With the great books of all ages on hand we need not act as if wisdom begins with us. But coming up to

the level of our forebears first (and that takes some doing!), we can perhaps make little advances here and there. We shall not understand today's world apart from yesterday's. No list of great books will satisfy everybody. I am sure that you are all familiar with the set published by Britannica and the University of Chicago. It represents the choice of a large group of scholars. It might serve to begin with. Each book leads to other books, so you will go on. The set is not perfect. How could it be with Luther entirely omitted while Aquinas has two fat volumes and Freud one? A good history of literature will help one get started. The library will provide guides like: *The Reader's Adviser and Bookman's Manual* (the Complete Guide to Modern and Classical Literature in Print, with Biographical and Critical Information) or Helen E. Haines' *Living with Books, the Art of Book Selection*. The main thing is to get started and to stick to it. Learn to shift your mental and emo-

tional gears smoothly and quickly. Keep a meaty volume of theology going, and balance it with some others. Use bits of time for ephemeral reading like newspapers and popular magazines.

As God's workman using all things to glorify Him, may you find the pleasure and profit in books that will help you to be good ministers of Jesus Christ and sometimes, at least, lead you to the experience of Winfred Ernest Garrison, who wrote:
Softly I closed the book as in a dream,
And let its echoes linger to redeem
Silence with music, darkness with its gleam.
That day I worked no more, I could not bring
My hands to toil, my thoughts to trafficking.
A new light shone on every common thing.
Celestial glories streamed before my gaze.
That day I worked no more; but, to God's
praise,
I shall work better all my other days.⁴

⁴ Quoted in *The Wonderful World of Books*, ed. Alfred Stefferud. The New American Library (New York, 1959).