



HOW TO READ THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE: FOR ADVANCERS

It is some time now since you first entered the church's treasure trove. You are acclimatized to its wonderland of truths and are glad of the way your discoveries to date have deepened your worship and helped you to converse at a deeper level with others you have encountered in the trove. Indeed, you are also glad, perhaps, to discern ways in which God has used you to influence others to grow in the use of their minds. It excites you to know that they see what you see. You wish others would too, for the treasure trove is not for the elite among Christ's forces. It is for all.

But if the truth be known, your hold on the sense of wonder that first hit you when you stepped over the threshold of the treasure trove is on the wane. How can that be? Yet, in the secret recesses of the heart it is difficult to confess, where necessary, that familiarity with the jewels of Christian truth has bred a subtle contempt. Your experience of reading tells you that the same truths can crop up in one book after another. That is O.K., and only to be expected, but it is their well-worn anecdotes that get you. If the author does not sound excited by what s/he is writing, then how can you be expected to stay fresh? Moreover, as life progresses so the tyranny of the urgent seems to steal away more of your time. Time and freedom to think is a memory of yesteryear. Nowadays you may have the pressure of work and the kids to cart around to daily after-school activities. When you get a moment to yourself, the phone inevitably rings, and then there is these days the enslavement to checking for the latest e-mail. Fears are setting in that you are becoming one of the many who once promised so much but have settled for the best of this life: the spouse, career, home, the 2.4 kids, with church tacked on. Suddenly, you find that the enthusiasm of others has begun to outstrip your own. Perhaps their usefulness to God will as well.

If this is you, evidently the time has come for a rethink; a time to recapture, in William Cowper's words, "the blessedness [you] knew when first [you] saw the Lord." The reading of Christian literature does not supplant the importance of prayer, Bible study or fellowship in personal renewal, but it plays its part if we read wisely.

DON'TS

Don't forsake the treasure trove.

You may have to find your own pace around its wonders, but to forsake it altogether will be to settle for the middle-aged life of spiritual mediocrity. Try to recall what it was that first thrilled you: the stretching of the mind, the expansion of the capacities of the heart for worship, the sense that God was using your learning in the service of His Kingdom. The problem, you will discover, is not that "the gold has grown dim" (Lam. 4:1 [ESV])—far less that there's better gold outside the trove (a new soap opera, another round of cable news, etc.)—but that you have rested content taking in the King's lighter jewels, when all along these were preparing you to take in the weightier ones. In other words, what you been reading has failed to stretch you. Perhaps your reading now needs some organization. For all the pages you have turned, you may be no nearer a mature understanding of Christianity's historical and doctrinal framework of belief than the day you entered the trove. How God's redemptive acts—notably the incarnation, the atonement, resurrection, ascension, outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the return of our Lord—fit together may still be a puzzle to you; as also how the Bible's doctrines of revelation, God, man, Christ, salvation, the church and the last things hang together; not to mention the great lessons of church history—the spread of Christianity, the history of doctrine, the Reformation, the history of revivals, the development of the modern missionary movement. Thus, the maturing of your usefulness in the church and the public square has reached a plateau; maybe even a lowly one. You rummage around for answers to the questions of young Christians or non-Christians in a way that belies your years of reading. The problem is that your reading has been arbitrary rather than organized. You have been reading rather than studying. There is a difference, and the difference tells.

Don't fall prey to the axiom "Just preach the gospel!"

In the mouths of some, this slogan is code language for an insecurity that is challenged by the way you have been educating yourself. Be loving and patient with such, for in cases like this the use of the slogan is born of a lack of the sort of giftedness and passion that God has given you. Maintain a silence but recall internally the fact that there is far more to the gospel and to Christian service than a parrot-like repetition of certain proof-texts. We are in a day when men and women are looking



for serious answers to serious questions. Worn-out pat answers are getting the church nowhere, but in many areas of the west this is what we have been giving out. And then we lament that the masses find the church irrelevant.

In the mouths of others, the slogan is more intolerable. It hides a lack of willingness to learn. If you venture beyond the surface of matters in the presence of such, they are likely to suggest you are majoring on minors; hairsplitting even. What their anti-intellectualism has kept from their view is that issues of secondary importance (if that, indeed, is what they are) are important nonetheless. They have an importance *in their own sphere* and require an outlet for discussion.

Don't give Christian reading a bad name.

The pernicky spirit—one that is constantly hairsplitting—is perhaps the chief reason some are put off entering more deeply into the study of the faith. The hairsplitter is the person who argues about terms and labels but fails to discern that the core of the matter lies in the underlying ideas. She/he also prioritizes inappropriately the Scripture's hierarchy of truths, and likely hangs out around the borders of revelation, preferring to dance with speculation than with clear biblical principle. Oftentimes, she/he will also raise her/his pet issues at the most inappropriate, even insensitive, of moments. The result is that the "Just preach the gospel!" advocates think that the study of Christian doctrine or history is for eggheads, or worse, the argumentative—the church splitters if you like. The truth is, that hairsplitters need to be reminded of the centrality of the gospel and the simplicity of Christian service. Other readers may emulate in embryo the great Calvin who became a theologian in order to become a pastor. "Calvinettes" are left bemused by the charge that the gospel is inevitably antithetical to serious Christian study. Turning a deaf ear to the chanters of "Just preach the gospel!" and evading the pitfalls of the hairsplitter, they prefer to heed the example of those first-century converts who "devoted themselves [i.e., maintained constantly] the apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). This they did not passively but actively, searching the Scriptures, in Berea at least, to see whether the teaching of none other than the apostle Paul (!) was true (Acts 17:11).

DOS

Do balance your reading with thought.

This idea is an extension of the idea of praying through what you read (see *How to Read Theological Literature: For Beginners*). Know that those most insightful in the church are not the ones who have out on permanent loan the ideas of others, but those who in thinking through what they read have made their own what they first learned from others, enriching it through biblical contemplation and adapting it to their given context. Please understand, however, that what I recommend is not a sort of car theft, as if we change the number plates and the color, and then proudly drive around as if the car is our own. No, we acknowledge our sources, but we make clear where we agree with them and where we beg to differ. In this way we train ourselves how to think, but ultimately, how to serve in the capacities to which God calls us.

Do be prepared to break ranks with the party line, when and where it is wise and necessary to do so.

As an advancer in the truths of Scripture and theology, it would almost certainly be problematic to launch a new line of thought on seismic doctrines that have been much debated in the history of the church: the doctrines, for instance, of Scripture, of the Trinity, of Christ, of the atonement and of justification. Would-be or even established theologians could be more careful in this regard. But it would be wrong of me, in warning you, alternatively of the danger of being a hairsplitter, to imply that there is no room left for independence of thought. There is! But while I am not encouraging an isolationism of belief or action (Prov. 18:1), our community needs folk who have the strength of character to resist the subtle group-think that pervades our Evangelical and Reformed circles. The uniformity expected of us is stifling the very sympathetic criticism of our tradition's beliefs and history from which we may grow and advance.

Stand fast, therefore, in the liberty you have in Christ to think and to speak His thoughts after Him. This liberty demands not that you ignore the received opinion, but that you submit it continually to Scripture. We need not, then, be enslaved to the iconic names in the church's own cult of celebrity nor give credence to the game of name recognition over the quality of substance, but when the situation calls for us to express our



freedom let us do so humbly with a view to building up our respective congregations or communities.

Do keep touch with the gospel.

Instead of belittling those calling for narrow or simplistic focus on the gospel, think hard on statements of theologians such as James Denney: “I don’t care anything for a theology that doesn’t help a man to preach”; “I don’t care anything for a theology that doesn’t help a man to evangelise.”

Do work hard at breaking down what you know.

We do not know what we think we know until we have found a way of communicating it well. We learn then in three main stages: reading, thinking or processing, and articulating. By the time we reach the stage of articulating, we have become teachers, and are at a point of teaching others what we have first learned, increasing thereby our service to the Lord by passing on the deposit of the Christian faith we have first received.

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