



HOW TO READ THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE: FOR BEGINNERS

As I look at my life to date, reading has certainly been one of its most pleasant and rewarding discoveries. I say 'discovery', because reading was not something that readily interested me. It took me the best part of twenty years to learn that books could be such friends. I am thankful that Christian books were among these friends right from the time reading took on an importance for me. Never have I found it difficult to prioritise my reading. For this, I am indebted to my late peer Peter Frost (1965-2003). He taught me by example one summer that Christian literature is for the young as well as the old, and that it can serve an precious role in the deepening of personal faith.

So, after twenty years of non-stop reading, seeking to catch up those years I frittered away as a child on 'the beautiful game' (soccer, of course!), I pass on a few personal tips to those hoping to gain the sort of pleasure that many another have had in developing their understanding of the Christian faith.

Don'ts

Don't presume that because you were not a reader as a child or as a teenager that the reading of good Christian books is beyond you. A love for God and His Word will inspire you to read more than any incentive given you to read school literature.

Don't be put off learning more of the faith if, at first, you pick a book that is either not well written or not where you are at. Go on to another book, but keep the first one. It is likely God will use it in your life in His timing.

Don't be afraid to ask for help knowing where to begin. The Christian faith is a huge subject with multiple subjects: Old Testament, New Testament, theology, church history, contemporary issues. Each of these disciplines has subject areas of their own, and most areas have multiple texts to choose from.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking that you have to read as quickly as you can to get through as many books as possible. I have always found helpful the words of the great Baptist preacher C H Spurgeon: 'Read much not many'. It is more important that you read well than that you read many. If the book is your own, I recommend you read with a pencil in hand, adding

at the back of the book your own index of matters and quotations that are important to you.

Don't fall likewise for the trap of thinking that because a book, hot off the press, is all the rage, that it must be read immediately. Resist peer pressure. In many cases, such books are not the publishing event the publishers hope for. Keep to your own agenda, reading, I remind you, not to impress in conversation, but to grow as a Christian.

Don't let the reading of good Christian literature overtake your desire to read the Scriptures or to serve your God. The reading of good Christian literature is not an end in itself. We read to get to know better God and His Word, and to be more effective in His service.

Dos

Do begin. Find a book that looks interesting and personally relevant, determine to engage your mind and your heart, and just begin. It may seem alien at first to think about spiritual issues outside of worship, but, with the blessing of God, you'll warm to the exercise and not look back. Remember that Christians who remain ignorant in the face of opportunities to develop their understanding, minimise their personal development and the effectiveness of their service to the church and the world. If you cannot afford books or don't know what to buy, try soliciting the opinion of a Christian you respect. Your minister, elders or church librarian should also be glad to make suggestions.

Do prioritise your reading. Focus overall on literature that nurtures a high view of God, exalts the name of Jesus, leads you more deeply into the Holy Scriptures, and encourages your involvement in the church and in the world. Be cautious about self-help books that ape those of the world. Remember, 'It's not about me' ~ to draw on a recent title.

Do seek to read relevantly. When considering what to read, ask yourself what is the biggest hole in your learning about God, the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the gospel, God's Word, the mission of the church etc. Also consider those areas of your spiritual life in which most growth is wanting. Read to grow!

Do share what you are reading ~ the ideas if not the books (always remember that we Christians are not very good at returning books). Inspire those around you to read and grow. Use your reading to share the gospel. Give books as gifts.



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Do read discerningly. Authors, like preachers, are fallible. Not everything they write reflects biblical teaching. Emulate the Berean Christians who checked Paul's preaching by Scripture (Acts 17:11). If you are unsure, ask a Christian who is noted for sound knowledge of the Scriptures.

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