

**The Minister and His Study:
The Place of Reading in Pastoral Ministry**

*The cloak that I left at Troas with Carpus, bring when thou comest, and the books,
especially the parchments.*
2 Timothy 4:13, ASV

ARBCA Circular Letter 2007

Dear Brethren,

The subject approved at last year's ARBCA General Assembly for the Circular Letter in 2007 was, "The Place of Reading in Pastoral Ministry." By common consent the churches also asked me to write the letter, and I humbly submit the following for your consideration and reflection.

As the apostle Paul writes his second epistle to Timothy, he does so from the confines of a Roman prison awaiting trial. These are some of the last words he pens, or at least some of the last that are inspired and included in the canon of Scripture. The time of his departure is at hand (4:6). His grace-filled life and productive ministerial career are coming to an end. In this context the mighty apostle concludes that he has three present needs: companionship; a cloak; and reading material—*the books and especially the parchments*.

The first two are obvious and almost intuitive. Paul has been systematically abandoned by a number of former friends and ministerial associates. Others pursue ministry in far-flung regions of the Roman Empire. He is for the most part alone in prison (only Luke is with him) and feels isolated. Good friends would be an encouragement, so he asks that Timothy, his son in the faith, and Mark, now useful once again for ministry, come to him. Winter approaches (v. 21), hence the need for a warm coat to ward off the winter chill.

But what about the books and parchments? Are they necessary as Paul approaches his end? Besides, Paul has been the recipient of special revelation. So much of the New Testament is the permanent record of God's new covenant speech to his people mediated through this servant of God. How important are the books and parchments to Paul? Well, he must have them, even in prison, at the end of his days. Even an apostle wants books to read!

If such a leading light in the early church, the apostle to the Gentiles, requires books to read, what about those lesser lights of today, ordinary gospel ministers in our churches? How can they do without them? While Paul's remark in v. 13 appears almost trivial and out of place in that Book which records the splendor of our salvation, it must be kept in mind that this too is the word of God, given for our instruction and obedience. Whatever the books and parchments were they were precious to Paul, as well as indispensable to his present circumstances. Paul is lonely, aware of the church's enemy, considers his own mortality, and sends for books.

WHY SHOULD MINISTERS READ?

At some level, this reference is not surprising. Christians have always been known as People of the Book. The Scriptures are central to the life of the Christian, and even those Christians who are non-readers by nature, who might ordinarily find reading a chore, love the Bible and have a deep and abiding interest in its contents.

In addition, ministers must read because it is central to their calling. Even a casual reading of the Pastoral Epistles will reveal that the minister's primary responsibility in the church is that of teacher. As a sample, we discover he must be apt to teach, put brethren in mind of certain things, give heed to the public reading of the word, to exhortation and to teaching, labor in the word and teaching, and teach and exhort (1 Timothy 3:2; 4:6, 13, 16; 5:17; 6:2). Likewise, Paul maintains the importance of preachers and teachers of the word in 2 Timothy 1:11, 13; 2:2, 14, 15, 24, 25; 4:1, 2, 5. The same may be found in Titus, especially 2:1, 15. At some point the obvious suggests itself: if ministers are teachers, how can they teach unless they have something to teach? A teacher must first be a learner!

Our confession, the *Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689*, picks up this note in 26:5: "In the execution of this power wherewith he is so intrusted, the Lord Jesus calleth out of the world unto himself, *through the ministry of his Word*, by His Spirit, those that are given unto Him by his Father..." In 26:10: "The work of pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ, in his churches, *in the ministry of Word* and prayer, with watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to Him..." Finally, in 26:11: "Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches, *to be instant in preaching the Word*, by way of office..." (emphasis mine).

Clearly, both the Scriptures and the Confession teach the same thing: ministers are principally and primarily preachers and teachers. That is their calling and that is their great work. The minister is a *specialist*, not a *generalist*. Since teachers need something to teach, they need to be life-long students, continuous readers of the Book and books.

Almost universally in Reformed circles since the days of the Protestant Reformation, pastors of local churches have been referred to as "Ministers of the Word" (or, of Word and Sacrament). God was at the center of belief, his appointed means the center of church life. The minister, though no more a priest than any other member of the body of Christ, nevertheless had a special God-appointed responsibility to announce the terms of salvation and to reassure his people of the same by means of water, wine, and bread.

In the past generation or two, a subtle shift has taken place, sometimes even in the Reformed world. Pastors are no longer ministers of the word but managers of people or programs in the church. Management has overtaken ministry. The God-appointed cleric has become either a coach or a clerk. People and programs have overtaken proclamation, so there is little time left or need to read books, except for those on therapy and sociology on the one hand or management techniques on the other. The family-room and the boardroom have replaced the study.

John Stott remarks:

If today's pastors were to take seriously the New Testament on the priority of preaching and teaching, not only would they find it extremely fulfilling themselves, but also it would undoubtedly have a very wholesome effect on the Church. Instead, tragic to relate, many are essentially administrators, whose symbols of ministry are the office rather than the study, and the telephone rather than the Bible (*Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, 124).

Though Stott's comments are dated, and we could add to the telephone all manner of new technology, he is right. Whatever necessary and legitimate place there may be for management and administration, should not someone else do it? Biblically, pastors are not managers of people or movers of paper but ministers of the word! If so, this may require a radical restructuring of our schedules. It is not people-persons or paper-pushers we want, but God-saturated persons, able to

teach the whole counsel of God. As the Dutch theologian Herman Witsius claimed in the 17th century, “No one teaches well unless he has first learned well.”

WHAT SHOULD MINISTERS READ?

Our text is not altogether clear as to the precise nature of the books and the parchments. Speculation runs high in the commentaries. The difference between the two words implies that parchments were more valuable and enduring than the books. Some have suggested that Paul requests legal documents that might prove useful in his defense before the Emperor. It seems more natural, however, to adopt the view that what Paul requires are those books essential and central to his calling as a Christian and an apostle. He asks for the parchments, the Scriptures, perhaps the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), *especially* them. Then he wants books. These may have been secular books, copies of pagan authors he knew so well and referenced in his public ministry, or perhaps those books that point to Christ, either his own epistles or early accounts of the life of Christ (Luke 1:1-4). In any case, the books were scrolls he found profitable in his life and work. From this we learn:

First, read the Bible. There is no substitute. Read it first, regularly, and repeatedly. Read it again and again, for the good of your own soul, as well as for the benefit of the people you serve. Paul wanted the parchments *especially*. Stott writes, “The higher our view of the Bible, the more painstaking and conscientious our study of it should be” (*Between Two Worlds*, 182). James Stalker’s comments are also to the point:

Hence one of the primary qualifications of the ministry is an intimate familiarity with the Scriptures. To this end a large proportion of the study required of you at college is directed; and the subsequent habits of ministerial life have to be formed with the same object in view. A large portion of our work is the searching of the Scriptures, and a preacher of the highest order will always be a man mighty in the Scriptures (*The Preacher and His Models*, 108).

Samuel Miller claims:

He is, then, to be ready, on all occasions to explain the Scriptures. This is his first and chief work. That is, not merely to state and support the mere simple and elementary doctrines of the gospel; but also to elucidate with clearness the various parts of the sacred volume, whether doctrinal, historical, typical, prophetic, or practical. He is to be ready to rectify erroneous translations of sacred scripture; to reconcile seeming contradictions; to clear up real obscurities; to illustrate the force and beauty of allusions to ancient customs and manners; and, in general to explain the Word of God, as one who has made it the object of his deep and successful study (*An Able and Faithful Ministry*, 10).

Second, read the basic books. Through the centuries the Christian church has insisted upon an educated ministry. A robust biblical and theological education is a necessity, not a luxury. Our Association officially endorses the principle through its support of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies. Prospective ministers should get all the formal training they can.

Ideal as this is, not every minister in our circles has had the benefit of significant formal training; but all can read! Paul had read the works of secular philosophers and historians. He could interact with ideas. His education gave him a trained mind, with the necessary critical thinking skills that accompany such training. He learned how to be precise and to make clear distinctions. One pastor without the benefit of formal training, arriving home shortly after the end of World

War Two, accepted a call to a small rural church and felt immediately overwhelmed with all that he did not know about the world of ideas and the Word of God. For the next dozen years he spent nine hours a day in his study, six days a week, just reading, hoping to catch up. That, in addition to other pastoral responsibilities!

For further reflection on the above, the reader may want to consult several articles in volume one of *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*. As well, consider the following from Herman Witsius:

He who would be a true theologian, and worthy of that honorable appellation, must lay the foundation of his studies in the lower school of nature and from every quarter of the universe, from the wonders of divine providence, from the monuments of ancient as well as modern history, from the shrines of all the arts, from the beauties of various tongues, bring together and store up in his memory, as in a treasury of the most sacred kind, those things which, when afterwards advanced to a higher school, he may lay as a foundation for a nobler superstructure (*On the Character of a True Theologian*, 28).

Third, read the best books. You will not have time to read everything, so be selective. For the most part read the books. Read the one book from which all others appear to draw their ideas. (For example, read Calvin!) Read the great books first, the primary sources. Begin with old books and the classics, those that come highly commended and have stood the test of time. Read carefully new ones, which may be full of novelty and speculation, and when the novelty wears off will soon be forgotten. The remedy for our age is not innovation but spiritual renovation. As one said, “Newest is not always truest.”

HOW SHOULD MINISTERS READ?

First he must read regularly. Reading must become habit. The best teachers in the world are those who never stop learning. Calvin comments on Deuteronomy 5:23ff., “None will ever be a good minister of the Word of God unless he is first of all a scholar.” Spurgeon likewise remarked, “He who has ceased to learn has ceased to teach. He who no longer sows in the study will no more reap in the pulpit.” The minister must never stop learning.

Reading must be a priority, or it will never be done. The pastor must determine to read every day, even if he is bi-vocational. Let the cry be, No day without its line! He must determine to win the battle over the tyranny of the urgent. He must decide when he is available and when he is not, apart from emergencies. Some things won’t get done if you read. Get used to it! James Boice noted:

The ministry should not only be an educated ministry. It should be educable and self-educating. If it is, the preacher will continue to be fresh, alive, and interesting. If it is not, his material will soon run out and the sermons will become repetitious and boring (*The Preacher and Preaching*, 95).

Second, he must read systematically. He must read methodically, through all the biblical and theological disciplines. He must not be a man of one thing but balanced, avoiding every hobby-horse. Donald Macleod reported that the Scottish minister William Cunningham gave his students a drilling in theological method and a sense of theological proportion. Have a system and work the system; have a plan and work the plan. The books you purchase are not for decoration but for edification. Read them!

Third, he must read widely. Read the books and the parchments. As J.C. Ryle said:

It demands...a diligent redemption of time. We should give attention to reading, every day that we live. We should strive to bring all our reading to bear on our work. We ought to keep our eyes open continually, and be ever picking up matter for our sermons...We should be keeping in our mind's eye our Master's business—observing, noting, looking out, gathering up something that will throw fresh light on our work, and enable us to put the truth in a more striking way. He that looks for something to learn will always be able to learn something (*Warning to the Churches*, 40).

Fourth, he must read wisely. Learn to read selectively. Be wary of wasting your time with the glut of information available today, especially from the internet, much of which cannot be verified as to author or truthfulness. Everyone is a writer; everyone has a blog; everyone claims to be an authority.

Some books are the best book on the subject; some books are just good books; and some books are bad books. Not every book is the best book, and many books are dangerous books. Richard Baxter noted that some are fitter to puzzle than to edify.

Determine to read with discretion. Be willing and ready to lay aside that book which cannot defend its right to exist. There is plenty to do without wasting time perusing “words without profit.”

Learn also the art of skimming. Some books beg to be read thoroughly and underlined carefully. Others may be surveyed and archived for future reference. Be familiar with your library. “Make some your best friends; greet others only occasionally.”

Fifth, he must read devoutly. There is a balance to be sought between doctrine and practice. John Murray asserted that the Christian’s goal was intelligent piety. Neither a mystical pietism nor a dead rationalism is what the Scriptures envision. Read with purpose; read and meditate; read for the good of your soul; read and pray. Be mastered by what you read. Warfield claimed that the extremes of pietism and rationalism have ever hunted in couples and dragged down their quarry together. He also claimed that knowledge without zeal is useless; zeal without knowledge is worse than useless—it is positively destructive. “What we need in our pulpits are scholar-saints become preachers,” said Warfield (*Selected Shorter Writings*, 1:378). Or, in the words of Witsius once again,

In order that he may be thus instructed, let him heartily renounce his own wisdom; let him become a fool that he may be wise...In studying let him not only read but pray; let him commune not with man alone but with God in prayer, with himself in meditation (*True Character*, 37).

WHO CAN HELP MINISTERS IN THEIR READING?

The circular letter is designed to be read by church members as well as by her officers. Here is a particular word for them as they think of their pastors and reading:

First, give him the respect his office deserves. Your minister(s) is a gift from Christ, given to you in the church for the benefit of the body. John Owen is helpful as he writes,

There is a greater glory in giving a minister to a poor congregation, than there is in the instalment and enthroning of all the popes, and cardinals, and metropolitans, that ever were in the world: let their glory be what it will, Christ is upon his theatre of glory in the communication of this office and these officers (*The Works of John Owen*, 9:439).

Owen mentions three things that are required in every one who may be esteemed to be a gift given by Christ to the church: an imitation of him; a representation of him; and a zeal for him. There is a representation of Christ in all his offices:

To represent Christ in his prophetic office. He was the great Teacher of the church; and the principal work of ministers is, “to preach the word in season and out of season”;—by all means to carry on the church in the knowledge of God, and of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. “I will give them pastors that shall feed them with knowledge and understanding.” Those who take upon themselves to be pastors, and neglect this work of feeding the flock, may, at as cheap a rate, and with equal modesty, renounce Jesus Christ (*Works*, 9:437).

Second, give him your attention. Remember all that reading, preparing and preaching is not just for him but for you. In a sermon entitled “The Character of a True Evangelical Pastor,” the Puritan John Flavel observed:

Your barrenness and unpersuadableness, your divisions and instability cost us more, than all our other pains in our studies and pulpits. How easily and sweetly would the plough go, would you but set both your hands of prayer and obedience to assist us in that work....The stewards of Christ provide choice dishes for you, even feasts of fat things full of marrow; and serve it into your souls upon the knee of prayer in due season: have a care of despising it, if at any time the dishes be not garnished as you expect, with curious figures, and flowers of rhetoric. The Lord give you hungry appetites, sound digestions, and thriving souls; then shall ye be our **crown of rejoicing**, and we yours in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ: To the word of whose grace I commend you all, which is able to build you up, and give you an inheritance among them that are sanctified (*The Works of John Flavel*, 6:585).

Third, give them the gift of time. Let him do his work by not creating another agenda for him. Take some responsibility for your own spiritual upkeep. Love the brethren by not demanding too much of your pastor. He will be there when you need him.

Fourth, give him adequate compensation so that he can buy books. How can a man do his work without his tools? A tradesman requires tools; the tools of a minister’s trade are books. Spurgeon wrote:

Up to the highest measure of their ability they should furnish their minister, not only with food which is needful to sustain the life of his body, but with mental nutriment, so that his soul shall not be starved. A good library should be looked upon as an indispensable part of church furniture; and the deacons, whose business it is “to serve tables,” will be wise if, without neglecting the table of the Lord, or of the poor, and without diminishing the supplies of the minister’s dinner-table, they give an eye to his study-table, and keep it supplied with new works and standard books in fair abundance. It would be money well laid out, and would be productive far beyond expectation...Parsimony with a minister is false economy (*Lectures to My Students*, 1:190).

Fifth, give him time off. Consider giving him a sabbatical for study. The term sabbatical originally referred to the provision made concerning the land of Israel. Leviticus 25 requires a Sabbath of rest for the land every seventh year. After six years of sowing and harvesting, the land lay fallow for one year. The significance of rest for the land was more than an interest in soil chemistry. It acknowledged that the earth and its fullness belonged to the Lord. God was benefactor, and he would care for his people.

Sabbatical now appears principally in academic circles as a time away devoted to research. It is also used in churches to give ministers a much-needed break for study and refreshment. The well eventually runs dry and needs to be refilled. Circumstances and resources will vary from place to place, but surely those who have served well for a significant period can profit from time away from the press of duties. Study time is not wasted time, for him or for the church.

CONCLUSION

Fifteen hundred years after Paul wrote 2 Timothy, William Tyndale, likewise in prison for his faith, requested from the governor of Vilvorde Castle a cloak, a woolen shirt, a warmer cap, but also his Hebrew Bible, grammar, and vocabulary. Both men saw they had temporal and spiritual needs. Both recognized the importance of books.

Ministerial faithfulness rests upon the principle of stewardship. Ministers in a special sense are the chief stewards of Christ's house, who must give his household "food in due season" (Mt. 24:45-47). Flavel put it this way:

Believe it, sirs, all our reading, studying, and preaching, is but trifling hypocrisy, till the things read, studied, and preached be felt in some degree upon our own hearts. We tell our people (the Lord help us to tell the same to our own hearts) that there are similar, as well as saving works of the Spirit, by which their (and why not our own) souls may be lost...The labours of the ministry will exhaust the very marrow from your bones, hasten old age and death. They are fitly compared to the toil of men in harvest, to the labours of a woman in travail, and to the agonies of soldiers in the extremity of battle. We must watch while others sleep (*Works*, 6:586).

Thirty-five years ago the writer purchased a plaque with an inscription containing Martin Luther's Sacristy [study] Prayer. It has hung in his study ever since as a moving reminder of the minister's calling. May it prompt each one who is a minister of the word of God to be a faithful student and steward of that word.

Lord God, Thou hast made me a pastor and teacher in the Church. Thou seest how unfit I am to administer rightly this great and responsible office; and had I been without Thy aid and counsel I would surely have ruined it long ago. Therefore do I invoke Thee. How gladly do I desire to yield and consecrate my heart and mouth to this ministry. I desire to teach the congregation. I, too desire ever to learn and to keep Thy Word my constant companion and to meditate there upon earnestly. Use me as Thy instrument in Thy service. Only do not Thou forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

Your brother in Christ,

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