

Taking Captive Every Thought

Number 2. On reading great Christian literature

Taking Captive Every Thought is a series of papers published by Three Rivers Grace Community Church to encourage believers to pursue the goal stated in the Scriptures (II Cor. 10:5) and reiterated by the leaders of the Reformation: to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord in all areas of life. The papers therefore deal with a variety of aspects of life and how to bring them into submission to Christ.

Who is the earliest Christian author you have ever read? If your answer is someone earlier than C. S. Lewis, or, at the outermost, Oswald Chambers, your reading is uncommonly broad. We as a church are almost solely interested in reading the works of our contemporaries. We would benefit from a change in our habits. My point here is not to derogate popular authors such as Dr. Swindoll, Dr. Stanley, and Mr. Lucado, but when these are *all* the Christian stores offer, when “Christian classics” means the works of C. S. Lewis, when someone looking for a book by Martin Luther has to go to Borders Books because nothing by Luther is stocked by the local Christian bookseller, something is lacking in the church.

We in the present generation are the heirs of 2000 years of Christian life and faith, lived by the thousands of believers who have gone before us. These, our mothers and fathers in the faith, struggled with the same questions as we do today, fought the same temptations and worldly influences, experienced the same triumphs and failures, and endeavored to comprehend their relationship with the infinite, personal God of the universe just as also we must. They have handed down their wisdom to us in many works of theology and devotion. Do they have nothing to teach us? Are we most likely to correctly interpret the Bible when reading it in isolation from millennia of experience at the same task? Will our generation alone do better than the best minds of twenty centuries of faith? Surely humility forbids us to think so.

Since the rise of modern psychology, we are told that the problem of sin is merely a

matter of assuaging guilty feelings for the sake of one’s mental health. How many today know that G. K. Chesterton offered a devastating refutation of this—demonstrating that Christianity is the only way, not only to salvation, but to true sanity—in his 1905 book *Orthodoxy*? Whether to interpret the first chapter of Genesis literally or figuratively is presently a heated question. How many today know that a figurative interpretation was offered 1600 years ago by Augustine in his *Confessions*? Many people seek proof of the existence of God. How many today know that the standard arguments used to this day were stated over 700 years ago by Thomas Aquinas? Many are confused today about the doctrines of grace, predestination, and the like. But how many today have taken the trouble to investigate the issue by reading the original works of Luther and Calvin? Or, if one specifically prefers a Baptist view of the subject, why not look into Dr. John L. Dagg’s erudite but straightforward 1857 *Manual of Theology*?

For much of its history, the Christian church has had a reputation as a hidebound institution, in which sometimes ideas were honored simply for being old. Today, the church has the inverse problem: newer is better. Apparently, most of us see little use in reading much of anything more than 35 years old, preferring instead whatever is currently being heavily marketed by the Christian publishing industry, much of which lacks depth. Three commonly held views contribute to this situation:

First, many people expect that books of earlier centuries will be difficult and dull. The fact is that, as in any large body of literature, a

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variety exists. Some of these books are hard to understand, and some are not; some are more exciting than others; some are serious, and some are downright fun. The important question is what is to be gained. We will be motivated to read great Christian literature, if we know how we will benefit. Specifically, we stand to gain a richer spiritual life, and an enhanced ability to confront the culture with the gospel. If we limit ourselves to the writers of our own day, we are like someone on a restricted diet: we miss the rich experience and enjoyment available to us—we settle for the lukewarm oatmeal and the mashed potatoes, and miss out on the lasagna and the Triple Chocolate Torte. And like someone who has not bothered to take a drivers' education class, we leave ourselves less capable than we should be of navigating the world in which we live, if we remain ignorant of the great themes treated in 2000 years of Christian literature. This great body of works equips us with knowledge of correct doctrine, apologetics, and church history. It includes devotional writings, sermons, and imaginative fiction and poetry. Delving into it can make us better disciples of Christ.

Second, it is claimed that life was so different in ages past that the insights of those days are not particularly valuable today. This view is sometimes found among Christians, which is odd, given that the Bible itself, which we rightly esteem as the inspired word of God, is a very old book. Somehow, it is felt that this book 2000 (and more) years old is worth our time, and new books from the store are worth our time, but anything in between is not. We should consult the Scriptures themselves: "There is nothing new under the sun" (Eccl. 1:9). In Abraham, Sarah, David, Solomon, Martha, and Peter, the honest reader easily sees himself, and sees that the same selfishness, faithlessness, carnality, and materialism we see today have plagued mankind from time immemorial, and the only solution is the same as it ever was: a contrite appeal to the merciful God of the universe.

A third view is similar to the second, but stronger. It is that humanity is always progressing, and that persons of past centuries were less intelligent and less enlightened. This view is widespread in the secular culture, and is beginning to affect the church. A person of this opinion simply has either not read or not understood the works of Moses, Solomon, or

Augustine. The truth is that these authors convince the honest reader of nothing so much as his need for further education.

We stand to gain much from reading great Christian literature of all ages, and the benefits far outweigh the effort. Why not take a more expansive view of Christian history and life? Certainly such works as Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* and Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are massive undertakings, and are not for everyone—though they are for some, and I challenge those to read them. But many of the books of which I speak are not so daunting. Most of us have heard of Luther's "Ninety-five Theses;" why not read them? They are little longer than the present essay. Try also Luther's *The Bondage of the Will* and Augustine's *Confessions*. Reading the early fathers, such as Polycarp and Justin Martyr, provides a fascinating window on the first centuries of the church. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*—a work almost universally known in our nation 150 years ago—is both entertaining and enlightening. Those interested in devotional literature will benefit from Charles H. Spurgeon's *Morning and Evening*. A robust Christian worldview may be found in such books as *Orthodoxy* and *The Everlasting Man* by G. K. Chesterton. These and many other works are rich in spiritual insight, have stood the test of time—and are largely ignored by modern believers.¹

I challenge you, first, to read these great works yourself, and then, to encourage others to do the same. The Proverbs instruct us that "for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisors" (Prov. 24:6). As we put on the "armor of God" (Eph. 6:11), then, and endeavor to "fight the good fight" (II Tim. 4:7), why would we not avail ourselves of this great assembly of advisors? As with any advisors, we will sometimes agree with them, and sometimes disagree—but certainly we are better prepared when we have received their counsel.

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1. Many of the works named above may be downloaded from the Christian Classics Ethereal Library at Wheaton College (ccel.wheaton.edu). Dagg's *Manual of Theology* is available from the Founders Online (wwwFOUNDERS.org).