



Annual Book Review 2007

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It is time for my annual pre-summer book review and suggested reading list. With the summer months ahead of you I expect that you will find yourself lying in your hammock in the cool summer evening breeze with a good book in your hands. Or maybe your style is the beach with the warm sun on your face, your feet in the sand and a book in your hand. Or maybe you're like me, trying to cram in a portion of a chapter in between weeding the garden, mowing the lawn, answering phone calls, and preparing for the next wave of traveling family members coming to visit.

So, if you are looking for a good book to hold in one hand while you push the mower with the other, I offer the following from my own list of completed readings from the last year.

Theology

Trusting God Even When Life Hurts by Jerry Bridges (Navpress, 215 pgs). If God is all-good and all-powerful, then why does He allow pain, suffering, and evil to exist in the world? Where is God when a spouse is diagnosed with an illness? Where is God when an earthquake kills thousands? Some are led to conclude that God is not sovereign or powerful enough to stop evil. Jerry Bridges offers one of the best treatments of the sovereignty, goodness, wisdom, and love of God that I have ever read. He shows how God's sovereignty and goodness enable us to trust Him fully, even when life hurts. This book quickly made the list of my *all-time favorites*. I bought a couple of extra copies to have on hand to give away as gifts. The time to read and digest a book like this is before adversity strikes. Store up the

truths in your heart now so that when trouble comes, you will trust and not doubt. If life is hurting you now, then you will want to buy and read this book.

Sinners in the Hands of a Good God: Reconciling Divine Judgment and Mercy by David Clotfelter (Moody Publishers, 274 pgs). The title of the book is a play on Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Clotfelter gives a most comprehensive and readable defense of God's wrath toward sin and grace toward sinners. He writes out of his own intense struggle to accept the Bible's portrait of a just but loving God. He examines the biblical teachings on God's attitude toward sin, His plan to punish the guilty forever, and the relationship between grace and faith.

In the introduction, Clotfelter writes, "*Is there an eternal hell? Can a good God really send people there and leave them there? Doesn't He have the power and the goodness to save all people? If so, then why doesn't He do it? These are the concerns of this book.*"

This was a fantastic book, but one word of warning: you'll need to get your mind into gear to think through the difficult issues that Clotfelter tackles.

Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship edited by Philip Graham Ryken, J. Ligon Duncan, and Derek W.H. Thomas (P&R Publishing, 448 pgs). This book is a Festschrift in honor of James Montgomery Boice. The worship and glory of God were near and dear to the heart of James Boice.

This collection contains a good explanation and defense of the *regulative principle* (i.e. Scripture is to determine how and what we worship). A good treatment

is given to the biblical elements of worship in private and public life. Two chapters were worth the price of the book: “*Expository Preaching: Center of Christian Worship*,” and “*Worship Through the Ages*.” The chapter titled *Worship Through the Ages* is a great historical survey of the church’s worship practices through the last 2,000 years! Ever wonder what worship was like in the year 200? Or 1300? The chapter includes descriptions of the worship services and orders of service from different periods in the history of the church. Fascinating!

One warning: the book is written from the covenantal perspective and not a dispensational one. This has a way of cropping up when discussing subjects such as worship in the home, the Lord’s Supper, and Baptism.

The Pursuit of Holiness by Jerry Bridges (Navpress, 157 pgs) is a quick and convicting read. Essentially, the book is an exposition of **Hebrews 12:14**, “*Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification (holiness) without which no one will see the Lord.*” The author explains why holiness is essential to your daily Christian life and offers abundant application for your pursuit of personal holiness.

Current Issues/Events

Becoming Conversant With The Emergent Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications by D.A. Carson (Zondervan, 234 pgs) was bumped to the top of my priority list when someone requested that I teach a Sunday School class on the Emergent Church Movement. The book is a very fair and informative treatment of the philosophical and epistemological underpinnings of the Emergent Church Movement. It is a good introduction to a movement that is sure to affect evangelicalism negatively for years to come.

Leadership/Preaching/Counseling

When People Are Big and God is Small: Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man by Edward T. Welch (P&R Publishing, 239 pgs). The *fear of man* is a universal fear. We all fear men in different ways and in different degrees. Welch helps us to see just how we fear men, and how we are dominated by the things we fear. The answer to fearing man is to have a healthy fear of God (**Ecclesiastes**

12:13). Welch gives practical instruction on growing in the fear of God and overcoming the misplaced and even idolatrous *fear of man*.

On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons by John A. Broadus (HarperCollins, 332 pgs) is considered by most to be a classic on the subject of expository preaching. *Don’t waste your time or money on this book*. Every year I try to read at least one book on the subject of preaching, just to stay sharp and continue to learn. The original work by Broadus was published in 1870. The copy that I read was the *fourth edition*. The fourth edition has been influenced by a modern approach to preaching that I suspect would be abhorrent to Broadus.

For instance, early in the book, I read, “. . . a sermon without a text and without formal Scripture reference may be thoroughly Christian. . . Sometimes he [the preacher] may omit a text because no suitable text can be found for what he wants to say. . . Occasionally, he may see value in preaching without a text for the sake of variety.” (pg. 31)

You should be able to recognize instantly that the blight of modern preaching is sermons not based on texts. There is no value of preaching without a text. How can you remove the text (the Word of God) and fulfill the mandate to “preach the Word?” When the text is removed, you have no sermon, only a running monologue on whatever comes to the speaker’s mind. Unfortunately, the book encourages an approach to preaching that is devoid of power, sanctifying effect, and the Spirit of God.

A far more readable volume on preaching was ***Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*** (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 285 pgs), containing a compilation of chapters written by different authors including Albert Mohler, John Piper, and John MacArthur. The chapter titled “*Expository Preaching*” was alone worth the price of the book. The contemporary culture in which we live continually assaults pastors and teachers who are committed to the “foolishness of preaching.” This book contains a passionate plea to pastors to remain faithful to their calling to “preach the Word.”

Apologetics

I Don’t Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist by

Norman L. Geisler and Frank Turek (Crossway Books, 435 pgs) is a great book for the novice apologist. The book offers a LOAD of information about arguments for the existence of God, absolute truth, and the supernatural miracles of the Bible. All the major objections that are raised about the Christian faith are answered in a logical and thorough manner. This would be a great book to hand to the atheist/agnostic/skeptic in your life. You will enjoy reading Geisler answer the atheistic objections to the Christian faith. You will want to absorb the information that is offered and the arguments that are presented. If you have questions about the Christian faith you want answered, pick up this book. You'll enjoy the journey. It's non-technical and easy to read.

One problem that I have to mention in connection with the book is Geisler's own unquestioning commitment to the autonomy of the human will. Occasionally in the book the author starts beating his "free will" drum with statements like, "God would not and could not do anything to interfere with or influence your will." I respond to such nonsense by saying, "Tell that to Saul of Tarsus or Nebuchadnezzar!" Other than those occasional comments, this is a superb book!

In preparation for a sermon in the book of Acts on the subject of miracles, I read three books:

First, ***Miracles*** by C.S. Lewis (Zondervan, 294 pgs) is a book I have been wanting to read for a while. Lewis argues for the reality of miracles *philosophically*. His arguments are not religious, nor are they based upon Scripture. Lewis tackles the subject of miracles from a logical, rational, philosophical perspective to show that the occurrence of miracles is not only possible in a universe like the one we live in, but actually expected. Lewis dismantles the anti-supernatural bias of Naturalism and shows its logical inconsistencies. Having eliminated Naturalism as a viable worldview, Lewis shows how miracles fit with the laws of nature. He then carefully examines some of the miracles in Scripture to show that biblical miracles are not only possible, but given the world we live in, they are in fact, probable. This book will stretch your mind and make you think.

Second, ***The Healing Promise: Is It Always God's Will To Heal?*** By Richard Mayhue (Mentor, 282 pgs) is about the best treatment of the subject of miracles that I

have read to date. The book includes a comprehensive survey of the miracles recorded in the Bible, a treatment of the promise of James 5, and an evaluation of modern day "healers." One chapter of the book is written by Andre Kole, a Christian and one of the foremost magicians and illusionists in the world today. Kole unmasks the tactics used by modern day faith healers in a very gracious and evenhanded way. The book includes an interview with Joni Eareckson Tada on the subject of healing and an interview with John and Patricia MacArthur about Patricia's near-fatal automobile accident and how God used that to display His healing power.

Third, ***Power Religion: The Selling Out Of The Evangelical Church?*** by Colson, Packer, Sproul, McGrath and others (Moody Press, 353 pgs). Originally I thought the book was about "power evangelism," signs and wonders, and miracles. There is a section on "power evangelism," but the thrust of the book is on the evangelical church's fascination with the acquisition of power in politics, power in church growth, and power in the self of modern psychology. A well written warning on five trends that threaten the health of evangelical Christianity.

The Fallacy Detective: Thirty-Six Lessons on How to Recognize Bad Reasoning by Nathaniel and Hans Bluedorn (Christian Logic, 233 pgs) is a great primer on logic and reasoning. It is written for parents to use with kids 13 and up in teaching the skills of good reasoning. As a parent, you may find that the examples and exercises are a bit juvenile, but you will learn about the Red Herring Fallacy, Straw Man Fallacy, Genetic Fallacy, Statistical Fallacies, and how to recognize propaganda. I'm looking forward to my kids being old enough to use the material.

Biographical

Agape Leadership: Lessons in Spiritual Leadership from the life of R.C. Chapman by Robert L. Peterson and Alexander Strauch (Lewis & Roth Publishers, 74 pgs). It is certainly not a long book at only 74 pages, but it is a powerful little book. I had never heard of R.C. Chapman until I picked up the book to read it. Chapman was a well known and well respected leader in England during the last century. He was known for his remarkable life of selfless love.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon referred to Chapman as, "The saintliest man I ever knew." Chapman's life serves as an encouraging and challenging example to any man in spiritual leadership.

Jonathan Edwards, Evangelist by John H. Gerstner (Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 192 pgs). Gerstner explains, "*This book concentrates on one point and one point only: The evangelistic message of Jonathan Edwards.*" Jonathan Edwards is perhaps most famous for his sermon titled *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Edwards was known for helping ignite the Great Awakening, passionate evangelism, and as a staunch defender of the doctrines of the Reformation. That means that Edwards believed strongly in the doctrine of election and preached fervently the sovereign predestination of the elect to salvation. Does that sound like a contradiction to you? It might, if you mistakenly think that a belief in divine sovereignty in salvation precludes evangelism and gospel preaching. The fact is that predestinarian preachers have usually been evangelistic preachers. *One warning: as with any book on Jonathan Edwards, be prepared to think. It is a difficult read, but a rewarding one.*

The Hidden Smile of God: The Fruit of Affliction in the Lives of John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd by John Piper (Crossway Books, 170 pgs) is the second in the *Swans Are Not Silent* series. John Bunyan suffered imprisonment for twelve years, Cowper's own life was one long depression, and Brainerd suffered through the loneliness of wilderness ministry and the agony of tuberculosis, and transformed world missions forever. You'll learn a lot about these great saints and the fruit that came from the affliction they suffered for God's glory.

Ronald Reagan in Private (Sentinel, 271 pgs) by Jim Kuhn (Executive Assistant to the President) was a fascinating memoir of an insider in the Reagan presidency. Kuhn covers everything from Reagan's run for the nomination in 1976 all the way through the end of his second term. You'll get an insider's view of the air traffic controller's strike, the assassination attempt, Reagan's relationship with Margaret Thatcher, negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev and Iran-Contra. One of the most enjoyable books on Reagan I have read.

Hand of Providence: The Strong and Quiet Faith

of Ronald Reagan by Mary Beth Brown (WND Books, 204 pgs) chronicles the strong faith of America's 40th President from his own speeches, interviews, and writings. Many who were close to Reagan during his years as Governor of California and President were interviewed, including his close family members.

Many who have written about Reagan have found him to be a hard man to understand. Even Edmund Morris, the official biographer of Ronald Reagan, has been quoted as calling him an "enigma." As Brown writes, "*A flurry of recent best-selling books have attempted without success to unravel the puzzle of his life and personality. I would contend they are unable to understand Reagan because of inherent problems with the internal secularist worldviews of the experts and biographers who are attempting to explain him. . . . To understand this man, his decision-making process as president, and the unprecedented success it produced, you must understand his reliance on God.*" **An excellent book.**

Church History

Heroes and Heretics: Solving the Modern Mystery of the Ancient Church by Michael J. Svigel (IFL Publishing House, 59 pgs). It is a short read, but a good, brief overview of significant figures from church history including Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement of Rome, and many others. Svigel explains how orthodox Christian doctrine was preserved through the controversies and heresies that erupted in the early years of the Christian Church. You'll gain an appreciation for how the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3) has been preserved.

Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were by Leland Ryken (Zondervan Publishing House, 267 pgs) is a great place to start if you want an understanding of the Puritans. I have read many Puritan authors such as Ryle, Cotton Mather, Flavel, Owen, and others. *Worldly Saints* will give you the big picture perspective of Puritan thought and contributions. Ryken discusses the Puritan view on work, marriage, sex, money, family, preaching, worship, church, the Bible, education and social action. He does not gloss over Puritan faults nor overemphasize their strengths. It is a fantastically balanced treatment of an often misunderstood movement. One of the most interesting

chapters was one titled “*Learning From Negative Example: Some Puritan Faults.*” Well worth the read.

Two books by Iain Murray gave me much to think about. In ***Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858*** (Banner of Truth Trust, 424 pgs), I read a very thorough and theological evaluation of the American evangelicalism in early American life. Focusing on the first and second great awakenings, Murray traces the theological compromises that led to the modern day revivalism approach toward evangelism. You’ll learn where the “alter call” came from and which cultural and theological trends brought it onto the scene of American Christianity.

A good sequel to that book is ***The Old Evangelicalism: Old Truths For A New Awakening*** by the same author (The Banner of Truth Trust, 215 pgs). Evaluating the ministries, writings and practices of Edwards, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, and others, Murray explains the theology, practice, and philosophy that dominated the church which brought about such great revivals as the Welsh Revivals and the First Great Awakening. Focusing on the theological issues inherent in fruitful evangelism the book discusses the role of the law in bringing a sinner to Christ and the importance of understanding imputed righteousness. The one chapter dealing with the scope of the atonement and the universal proclamation of the gospel was worth the cost of the book!

May your summer be filled with faithful and fruitful reading!

Without Wax -



Pastor/Teacher

Footnotes:

1. A Festschrift is a collection of essays celebrating a significant scholarly achievement, or a commemorative anthology.