

TOWARDS A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF READING SYLLABUS

Purpose: To see a Christian theology of reading fleshed out; in particular, to see why Christians read and why Christians practice discernment with their readings while also expounding of how to be discerning, and how to read for the purpose of Christian growth and glorifying (thereby, enjoying) the Lord.

Let me preface my review with my observation of English classes at the college level. I've always felt that English class was a way for some professors to sneak in ideological causes to their students from other fields but without the academic rigors required in the respective field it came from. For instance Marxism or Fabian socialism wouldn't stand up in the field of economic and historical analysis, but in the past I've seen it imported wholesale into the English classroom. Certain philosophy wouldn't be able to stand under logical and philosophical scrutiny but it's brought into the English classroom, safely away from the use of syllogisms and the philosophical prying eye that is conscious of whether logical premises leads necessarily to the conclusion. History is presented in works of fiction without consciousness of historiography and attacks on Christianity are read while omitting the literatures produced in the discipline of Christian apologetics and philosophy. How many students are told to only interact with the assigned texts as evidences when the assigned readings come from extreme sources (I'm thinking of my time in undergraduate reading Michael Moore and recently a friend who had to read Karen Armstrong!).

TABLE OF CONTENT (TENATIVE SCHEDULE)

1. Why Christians Read

- Why Christians read the Bible
- Why Christians read other books
- Case Study: Strong Christians read

2. Why Christians should practice discernment in reading

- Selection
- Testing it according to the Word of God

3. How to read:

- The Bible
- Non-Canonical Books

4. What to Read

I. Why Christians Read:

- a. Explanation of section: Here we go over the purpose and benefits for Christians reading both the Bible and other books. We will also consider examples affirming the principle that strong Christians read.
- b. Why you should read the Bible
 - i. **Psalm 1's** summary: It is a blessing
 1. The blessing of not associating with sinners: "*How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,*

Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!” (v.1)

2. **Question:** How do we avoid the corruption of sinners, and sinful culture all around us? (v.2)

*”But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.”*

The blessed man’s relations to the Word of God:

- a. “delight”
- b. “he meditates day and night.”

3. Consequential blessings described (v.3)

*”³He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And ⁱⁿ whatever he does, he prospers.”*

ii. **2 Timothy 3:16:** It’s usefulness

“All Scripture is ^{inspired} by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for ^{training} in righteousness; ¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”

1. How it is profitable:

- a. “for teaching”
- b. “for reproof”
- c. “for correction,”
- d. “for ^{training} in righteousness”

2. Purpose (“so that”):

- a. “man of God may be adequate”
- b. “equipped for every good work.”

iii. **Psalm 119**

1. Help prevent and remove sins (v.3, 8-11, 16, 29, 36, 102-103)
2. Help with obedience (v.4-5, 8, 30, 33-34, 44-45, 51, 56-57, 59-61, 68, 106, 112, 117, 129, 168, 173)
3. Help with not being ashamed (v.6, 21-23, 31, 39, 51, 80)
4. Help us to worship Him
 - a. Help us remember Him (v.55)
 - b. Help us seek Him (v.58)
 - c. Help us to have reverence for God (v.38, 120)
 - d. Help us to be thankful (v.7, 62)
 - e. Help us to rejoice (v.14, 111, 162)
 - f. Help us praise (v.164, 171, 175)
 - g. Help us to meditate (v.15, 27,)
 - h. Help us sing (v.54, 172)
5. Help us share about God with others (v.12-13, 43, 46,)
6. Help us seek more of God’s Word when we have been exposed to it (v.16-20, 35, 47-48, 73, 78, 83, 97, 103, 108-109, 125, 131, 135, 140-141, 144, 167, 169)
7. Help counsel us for life (v.24, 42, 105, 130)

8. Help revive us (v.25, 37b, 40, 50b, 88, 93, 149, 154b, 156, 159)
9. Help us hear from God (v.26, 173)
10. Help comfort us (v.28, 32, 50a, 52, 76-77, 82, 114)
11. Help us avoid the vain things in life (v.37a, 53, 72, 127)
12. Help us lead us to salvation (v.41, 81, 94, 123, 154a, 155, 166, 170, 174, 176)
13. Help give us hope (v.49, 116)
14. Help us hate sins (v.104, 113, 115, 118-119, 126, 128, 136, 139, 158)
15. Help us want to have fellowship with believers (v.63, 74, 79)
16. Help us see God's loving kindness and faithfulness (v.64-65, 68, 90-91, 124, 132, 138)
17. Help us with discernment (v.66)
18. Help us undergo trials and persecution (v.69-71, 75, 84-87, 92, 95, 107, 110, 121-122, 133-134, 143, 145-148, 153, 157, 161)
19. Help us see God's law is absolute (v.89, 96, 137, 142, 150-152, 160)
20. Help us become wise (v.98-100)
21. Help give us peace (v.165)

iv. Application:

1. How do I cultivate the desire to read the Bible?
 - a. Keep this outline as a reference and review it.
 - b. Have fellowship with others by asking others why do they read the Bible and what did they
 - c. Go through **Psalm 119** on your own and categorize the blessings and reasons to read the Bible.
 - d. Have someone to be accountable for your reading.
 - e. Find what you most need now in your life and read passages on that topic.
 - f. Read the Bible to enjoy God's Word and savor Him.
2. How do I maintain and not lose my desire to read the Bible?
 - a. All the previous applications should be implemented.
 - b. Consistently and diligently apply it!
 - c. Whatever routine you have in reading the Bible, maintain it.
 - d. Keep on challenging yourselves with deeper understanding of the Word of God.

c. Why you should read other books

i. Introductory issues

1. Establishing the Need: Some say, "I only read the Bible, nothing else," with the attitude that a Christian should only read the Bible. But is this really biblical?
2. Clarification: Christians should read books beyond the Bible, but that does not mean Christians should read every kind of non-Christian books at all times. There needs to be discernment.

Reasons:

ii. Reading non-canonical books is not wrong: those who write the Bible also read non-Canonical books

1. Old Testament authors read non-Canonical books

a. Moses read the Book of the War of the Lords
(Numbers 21:14-15)

- i. The Book of the War of the Lords is not in the Bible.
- ii. Moses describes Israel's journey in Numbers 21:10-13.
- iii. Moses then quotes from the Book of the War of the Lords in Numbers 21:14-15.
- iv. Implication: If God is interested in history books enough to reference it, what does that mean to us as people of the Book?

b. Joshua read the Book of Jashar (Joshua 10:12-13)

- i. The Book of Jashar is not in the Bible.
- ii. In the context of this passage, five king are waging war against Gibeonites (Joshua 10:5) and Joshua leads Israel against the kings while the Lord cause son to stand still (v.12).
- iii. There is then a reference that this event was documented in the book of Jashar (v.13).

c. Author of 2 Samuel read the Book of Jashar (2 Samuel 1:18)

- i. Again, the Book of Jashar is not in the Bible.
- ii. In the context of this passage, King David laments the death of King Saul and his son Jonathan by chanting a lament (v.17).
- iii. There is then a reference that this song can be found in the book of Jashar (v.18).

d. Author of 1 Kings read the Acts of Solomon (1 Kings 11:41)

- i. The Acts of Solomon is not in the Bible.
- ii. In the context of this passage, the account of God bringing up adversaries against Solomon (v.14-40).

- iii. Since too many historical events have occurred reference to more historical account is given, pointing to the Acts of Solomon (v.41).
- e. Ezra know of, read and quotes secular letters and decrees (Ezra 4-5)
 - i. Letters of oppositions
 1. In the context of this passage, there were non-Jews who were actively plotting against the Jews rebuilding the Temple (Ezra 4:1-5).
 2. Part of their plan is to write a letter to King Artaxerxes (v.6-10).
 3. This letter is originally not the Word of God.
 4. The letter is quoted from vv.11-16.
 5. Consequence: End of temple work (v.17-24).
 6. Implication: If God felt it was important enough to record a secular letter to a king, what does that means to us as people of the Book when it comes to being knowledgeable of those who write and plot against the cause of Christ?
 - ii. Decree of King Cyrus
 1. In the context of this passage, the Jews continued to rebuild the Temple (Ezra 5).
 2. When challenged, the Jews knew about the decree of King Cyrus from the first year of his reign (v.13)
 3. They even know the content of what was written in it (v.14-17)
 4. This decree was important enough that Ezra 1:1-4 recorded it.
 5. Implication: If God felt it was important enough to record a secular political decree made by a king, what does that means to us as people of the Book when it comes to understanding political documents Biblically?
- f. Other possible non-canonical sources the Bible reference: 1 Chronicles 27:24, 29:29, 2 Chronicles 9:29, 12:15, 13:22.

2. New Testament authors read non-Canonical books
 - a. Paul use of Meander's writing in **1 Corinthians 15:33**
 - i. Meander was a non-Christian Greek popular play writer who lived around 300 B.C.
 - ii. One of his line was *"Bad company corrupts good morals"*
 - iii. Paul's used this to make a point: *"Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals.""*
 - iv. Implication:
 1. Paul's quotation of this Greek literature suggests that he was at least familiar with what must have been a saying that is common knowledge if not even having read the work himself.
 2. It shows familiarity of written play is not in of itself something that is wrong.
 3. This is more astounding considering this is a Jewish man familiar with Greek literature: **How much are we aware of our own and other cultural writings?**
 - b. Paul read Epimendies in light of **Acts 17:28a**
 - i. Context: Paul was preaching the Gospel to Athenian philosophers and explaining his presuppositions to them in order to make sense what he was saying.
 - ii. In the **first half of Acts 17:28** Paul said, *"for in Him we live and move and ^la exist,"*
 - iii. This is a quotation from a non-Christian Cretan seer and philosophical poet Epimendies who lived in the seventh or sixth century B.C.
 - iv. Implication:
 1. Paul's quotation here indicates his knowledge of Greek poetry and philosophical discourse. Therefore, it is not a sin in of itself to be familiar with poetry or philosophical discourse written by the world.
 2. While not adopting everything of the worldview of the authors whom he read, nevertheless there is a place for

Christians engaged in apologetics to know the literary output of the World with Christian discernment (the subject of Christian discernment will be eventually discussed) and employing it to defend the faith.

- c. Paul read Aratus in light of **Acts 17:28b**
 - i. Context: Paul was preaching the Gospel to Athenian philosophers and explaining his presuppositions to them in order to make sense what he was saying.
 - ii. In the **second half of Acts 17:28** Paul said, *“as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’”*
 - iii. This is a quotation from a non-Christian Greek poet name Aratus who lived in the third and second century B.C.
 - iv. Specifically, it’s a quote from the fifth line of Artaus’ Phaenomena, a poetic work on the constellation and the stars.
 - v. Implication:
 1. Paul’s quotation here indicates his knowledge of Greek poetry and literature on the constellation. Therefore, it is not a sin in of itself to be familiar with poetry or astronomical sources written by the world.
 2. While not adopting everything of the worldview of the authors whom he read, nevertheless there is a place for Christians engaged in apologetics to know the literary output of the World with Christian discernment (the subject of Christian discernment will be eventually discussed) and employing it to defend the faith.
- d. Paul read and used Epimendies in light of **Titus 1:12-13**.
 - i. Context: Paul is writing to Titus concerning how he ought to shepherd God’s people.
 - ii. In **Titus 1:12** Paul said, *“One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons.’”*
 - iii. This is a quotation from a non-Christian Cretan seer and philosophical poet

- Epimendies who lived in the seventh or sixth century B.C.
- iv. Paul affirm the truth of what Epimendies said in **verse 13a** and an application in light of this truth in **verse 13b**.
 - v. Implication:
 1. Paul's quotation here indicates his knowledge of Greek poetry and philosophical discourse. Therefore, it is not a sin in of itself to be familiar with poetry or philosophical discourse written by the world.
 2. Paul use of Epimendies indicate that sometimes non-Christian can diagnose society properly. There is a place for Christians to read sources on social science, cultural studies, etc.
- iii. Spiritual benefits in reading some non-canonical works
1. If a book is based upon the foundation of God's Word, then all the reasons why we ought to read the Bible that's covered earlier also apply to why one read Christian spiritual non-canonical books.
 2. God gave us teachers and teachers also teach through books.
 - a. God gave us teachers: "*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,*" (**Ephesians 4:11**)
 - b. Some teachers teach by the medium of books.
 3. "We read book after book, which helps us understand and apply the Word of God."¹
 - a. It helps us answer our questions (see Philip in **Acts 8** with the Etophian Eunuch).
 Note that this is now recorded for those who want to know what is **Isaiah 53** about.
 - b. It helps us deal with a matter right away: For instance, one is dealing with anger and the guy just began reading Matthew. You don't want him to wait until he finishes all the Gospel and half-way through the Epistle before one apply **Ephesians 4:26**.
 - c. Topical books can focus on the entirety of God's counsel on a subject.

¹ David L. McKenna, *How to Read a Christian Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 12.

- iv. Sometimes, “non-Christian Literature Can Describe the World, how it Functions, and how to subdue it.”²
- v. Apologetics Value
 - 1. Works that help understand our times and society.
 - 2. Works that equip us to defend our faith.

² Tony Reinke, *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 67.

- II. Case study: Strong Christians read
- a. Introduction
 - i. Point: “A nonreading Christian is a contradiction in terms.”³
 - ii. Here we want to consider several examples of famous Christians who were strong in their faith in church history, to see that their reading influenced their life.
 - b. Prophet Daniel (**Daniel 9**)
 - i. Situation (**v.1**)
 - ii. Daniel read from Jeremiah (**v.2**)

Was reading a prophecy from **Jeremiah 25:11-12, 29:10**.
 - iii. Daniel’s spiritual response to his reading (**v.3-19**)
 1. “*So I^l gave my attention to the Lord God...*”
 2. “*...to seek Him by prayer and supplications...*”
 3. “*... with fasting...*”
 4. “*... sackcloth and ashes.*”
 5. “*⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God...*” (**v.4**)
 6. “*and confessed*”
 7. Content of prayer (**v.4b-19**)
 - iv. Application:
 1. Note that Daniel’s reading of the sin of a generation before him prompted him to repent to God for his own sins.
 2. Note how the reading of God’s Word prompt Him to seek God.
 3. Note how he interpreted the times according to Scripture.
 - c. Apostle Paul (**2 Timothy 4:13**)
 - i. Situation
 1. Paul’s last letter.
 2. Difficulties
 - a. Abandonment (**v.10-11**)
 - b. Opposition (**v.14-15**)
 - ii. Paul’s request: “*When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments*”
 1. We don’t know what exactly were the contents, and it might have been Scripture.
 2. Either way, Paul in his most difficult days and before his death asked for something to read.
 - iii. Application:

³ David L. McKenna, *How to Read a Christian Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 27.

1. “*Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.*” (1 **Corinthians 11:1**).
 2. In what follows is a survey of those who were imitators of Paul throughout Church history.
- d. Augustine
- i. Who was he?
 1. Famous Christian theologian that lived during 354-430 A.D.
 2. Most famous book is probably Confessions, which recounts his salvation and battle with sin.
 - ii. His reading life
 1. Reading the Word of God led to his conversion: “As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children's game in which such a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one. I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find. For I had heard how Anthony happened to be present at the gospel reading, and took it as an admonition addressed to himself when the words were read: 'Go, sell all you have, give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me'[Matt 19:21]. By such an inspired utterance he was immediately 'converted to you' (Ps. 50.15). So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts'[Rom 13:13-15]” (The Confessions of Saint Augustine, Book VIII, Paragraphs 28 and 29.)
 2. View of non-canonical works: “Augustine invited Christian readers to borrow richly from the “gold leaf” found in non-Christian literature to illustrate matters of theology, ethics, and even worship.”⁴
- e. Martin Luther
- i. Who was he?

Great Protestant Reformer who lived during 1483-1546.

⁴ Tony Reinke, *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 75.

ii. His reading life

1. View on reading the Bible

Luther himself said, “Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scripture.”⁵

2. View on reading non-canonical books

a. Luther read Augustine: “Now began the period which Luther recalled at table in 1532: “At first I devoured, not merely read, Augustine.” He read through and annotated On the Trinity and The City of God in 1511 and 1512. In his earliest Introductory Lectures on the Psalms, 1513 and 1514, there are many citations from the writings of Augustine, particularly his Confessions. Luther’s earliest extant sermons cite Augustine, and “the nearest analogy to Luther’s [sermonic] method is that employed in Augustine’s homilies.” At least 24 of the great doctor’s works are cited in the Lectures on Romans, delivered in 1515 and 1516. By 1516 he knew Augustine well enough to reject, on the basis of internal evidence, the work on true and false repentance ascribed to the latter.”⁶

b. Luther had a healthy view of reading non-canonical books, saying “The number of theological books should . . . be reduced, and a selection should be made of the best of them; for many books do not make men learned, nor does much reading. But reading something good, and reading it frequently, however little it may be, is the practice that makes men learned in the Scripture and makes them pious besides.”⁷

f. John Calvin

i. Who was he?

1. Famous Christian theologian who lived during 1509-1564.

2. His most famous work is The Institutes of the Christian Religion.

ii. His reading life

1. He obviously read and taught through much of the Bible, evident from his huge commentaries.

⁵ Quoted from John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 78.

⁶ Richard D. Balge, “Martin Luther, Augustinian,” Winsconsin Lutheran Seminary Library, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/BalgeAugustinian.pdf> (accessed January 24, 2013).

⁷ Quoted from John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 95.

2. His view of non-canonical works:
 - a. “For Calvin, reading non-Christian literature is like sifting Rocky Mountain streams for glittering flakes of gold. He sees a lot of riverbed silt in the pan. But those with cool patience and a keen eye will eventually discover flakes of gold. And that gold can be traced back to the vein of pure gold—God.”⁸
 - b. “Calvin’s model is *generous*, because if humbly acknowledges the wealth of truth, goodness, and beauty articulated in non-Christian literature. Sinners do suppress God’s truth in their behavior (Rom 1:18-32). But it is impossible for sinners to suppress *all* the truth *all* the time.”⁹
 - c. “Calvin’s model is also *cautious*. Non-Christian authors are spiritually blind. Any light of truth in their writings is powerless to lead them to Christ and to salvation.”¹⁰
 - d. “Calvin’s model is also *sobering* because it reminds us that the truth gleaned by non-Christian authors only increases his or her sinful guilt.”¹¹

g. Charles Spurgeon

i. Who was he?

1. Famous English preacher of Metropolitan Tabernacle, lived from 1834-92.
2. “Charles Haddon Spurgeon is history’s most widely read preacher (apart from the biblical ones). Today, there is available more material written by Spurgeon than by any other Christian author, living or dead.”¹²

ii. His reading life

1. “Spurgeon’s personal library contained 12,000 volumes—1,000 printed before 1700.”¹³
2. “Spurgeon typically read 6 books per week and could remember what he had read—and where—even years later.”¹⁴
3. Spurgeon once said, “It seems odd, that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what he has revealed to others.”¹⁵

⁸ Tony Reinke, *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Eric W. Hayden, “Did You Know?” *Christian History* 29 (January 1991), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

4. "Spurgeon read *The Pilgrim's Progress* at age 6 and went on to read it over 100 times."¹⁶
5. Spurgeon's account of his youth in the library of his grandfather: "In my time, it was a dark den;—but it contained books, and this made it a gold mine to me. Therein was fulfilled the promise, "I will give thee the treasures of darkness." Here I first struck up acquaintance with the martyrs, and specially with "Old Bonner," who burned them; next, with Bunyan and his "Pilgrim"; and further on, with the great masters of Scriptural theology, with whom no moderns are worthy to be named in the same day. Even the old editions of their works, with their margins and old-fashioned notes, are precious to me. It is easy to tell a real Puritan book even by its shape and by the appearance of the type. I confess that I harbour a prejudice against nearly all new editions, and cultivate a preference for the originals, even though they wander about in sheepskins and goatskins, or are shut up in the hardest of boards. It made my eyes water, a short time ago, to see a number of these old books in the new Manse: I wonder whether some other boy will love them, and live to revive that grand old divinity which will yet be to England her balm and benison. Out of that darkened room I fetched those old authors when I was yet a youth, and never was I happier than when in their company. Out of the present contempt, into which Puritanism has fallen, many brave hearts and true will fetch it, by the help of God, ere many years have passed. Those who have daubed up the windows will yet be surprised to see Heaven's light beaming on the old truth, and then breaking forth from it to their own confusion."¹⁷
- h. Other great Godly men whose reading shaped their lives: Thomas Cramer, Jonathan Edwards, Cornelius Van Til, John MacArthur, etc.

¹⁵ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Commenting and Commentaries* (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1876), 11.

¹⁶ Eric W. Hayden, "Did You Know?" *Christian History* 29 (January 1991), 2.

¹⁷ Charles Spurgeon, "Happy Childhood at Stambourne," The Spurgeon Archive, <http://www.spurgeon.org/childhd.htm> (accessed January 24, 2013).