

I Send the Joys of Earth Away

Isaac Watts (1674-1748)

I send the joys of earth away;
 Away, ye tempters of the mind,
 False as the smooth, deceitful sea,
 And empty as the whistling wind.

Your streams were floating me along
 Down the gulf of dark despair,
 And whilst I listen'd to your song,
 Your streams had e'en conveyed me there.

Lord, I adore Thy matchless grace,
 That warn'd me of that dark abyss,
 That drew me from those treacherous seas,
 And bade me seek superior bliss.

There, from the bosom of my God,
 Oceans of endless pleasure roll;
 There would I fix my last abode,
 And drown the sorrows of my soul.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

A Pastor's Reading Plan, Part Two: Books

Kevin T. Bauder

For me, learning to read was like being initiated into the mysteries of a secret society. The ability to look at marks on a page and to register those marks in my brain as words, sentences, ideas, and stories—well, it seemed magical. It still does.

People who did not enjoy reading perplexed me. Later I learned that what came naturally and enjoyably to me was an opaque labor to others. Still, I naively assumed that those who worked with ideas must be readers. After all, how else could one communicate either a lengthy narrative or a sustained argument?

I gave pastors a high place among those who did the work of the mind. Perhaps this perspective came from watching my father study through Bible college. I still have vivid memories of him sitting at his desk with open books around him.

At any rate, it came as a shock to discover that most pastors read very little. Reasons for this deficiency probably vary from person to person. Some pastors are more gifted with personal skills. Others are more suited to bustle and activity than to careful thought. Nevertheless, the primary calling of every pastor is to do the work of the mind. If nothing else, preaching is a challenging intellectual activity, at least if a pastor intends to say something worth listening to. Not every pastor needs to be a scholar, but even very ordinary pastors need to be readers.

Becoming well read does not usually happen by accident. Those who read only what they feel like reading, and only when they feel like reading it, will gain only minimal and lopsided exposure to the world of ideas. A balanced reading program must be planned.

How much should a pastor read? Some complete only a volume or two of light reading in a year; others read as much as a book every day. To become reasonably well read, a pastor ought to aim to read just about a book every week. Any more and other areas of ministry may suffer (unless he is remarkably gifted). Any less and his mind will begin to suffer.



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Of course, books differ in length. Some can be completed in fewer than 100 pages, while others will run well over 1,000. An average book, however, is approximately 250 pages. Consequently, pastors should aim to average about 250 pages per week—50 pages for each weekday. For most pastors reading most books, that task will take no more than an hour each day.

Some reading has to be done over the long haul. Most pastors will not sit down and read straight through a Bible version, a systematic theology, or a technical commentary. These are projects that must be stretched out. Just two chapters of Scripture each day will get a reader through the Bible in about a year and a half. Commentaries can be read a week at a time in connection with sermon preparation—assuming that the pastor is an expository preacher who works through entire books of the Bible. For theology, Ernest Pickering used to recommend that pastors read 50 pages of systematic theology every week. That amounts to only 10 pages every weekday. At that rate a pastor can work through a fairly substantial systematic theology every few months.

To these sustained reading projects, pastors should add books that cover a variety of subjects. Naturally, they have a professional interest in books that deal with biblical issues. Besides commentaries they should be reading works on biblical introduction, history, backgrounds, and hermeneutics. Alongside these, pastors should read theological works that deal with more specialized questions: hamartiology, for example, or dispensationalism and covenant theology. They should also read volumes on topics in pastoral theology such as church administration, homiletics, and counseling.

Closely related to biblical and theological studies are two other disciplines: philosophy and history. Philosophical works, including books on logic, ethics, political theory, and aesthetic criticism, should be part of a pastor's reading rotation. So should historical (including biographical) works that cover every period.

For the good of his soul, a pastor should regularly read devotional works. These should include both classical works of devotion (Augustine's *Enchiridion*, for example, or Edwards's *Religious Affections*) as well as more contemporary works. Naturally, even devotional works should be read critically. Only one book is inspired, inerrant, and completely authoritative; all others need to be evaluated.

Two other categories deserve to be included. One is science. Although a pastor's work is more related to the humanities than it is to the sciences, he ought not to be scientifically illiterate. The other is *belles lettres* including works of literary fiction, poetry, and drama. These works of imagination are both enjoyable and worthy of study. Furthermore, they can teach a pastor how to appeal more effectively to the moral imaginations of his congregants.

Most people complete a certain amount of junk reading, designed to turn the mind off rather than to stimulate it. A pastor might read murder mysteries, political thrillers, or romances without necessarily doing himself harm, but he should not count these toward his reading goals. Instead, he should discipline himself to read through the above categories, more-or-less in rotation: biblical studies, philosophy, theological works, history, pastoral theology, science, devotion, *belles lettres*. Then every now and then he should throw in something completely different just to break up the rotation and expand his thinking.

I have tried to follow a rotation like this for the past 40 years, both as a pastor and as a professor (though as a professor I must read more than a book each week). Furthermore, I keep a log of my reading by title, page count, and category. The discipline of logging my reading helps me to stay accountable. It also gives me a quick way to see whether my reading is becoming imbalanced in any direction. Because I teach theology, of course I must read more in that discipline. Still, I don't want to neglect the others.

Consulting my log, I can see that the past ten books I have read include two belletristic works, one of which is also a work in Eastern religion and the other an exemplification of Medieval Catholicism. My list also includes a short volume on recent American history, a substantial work on biblical theology, a book dealing with the effects of psychedelic drugs, a book of political theory, a volume in theology proper, a short dogmatic theology, a volume of ancient history that overlaps with Old Testament backgrounds, and a work of ancient philosophy. While this list includes no devotional literature, I did spend a good bit of the summer reading devotional works. If there is a deficiency it is in pastoral theology, though at my stage in life that doesn't seem as useful as it once was.

So if you're a pastor, try this. Develop a plan that works for you—it doesn't have to be mine. But for the good of your mind, your soul, and your congregants, *read*, and read widely.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
