

A BOOK A WEEK KEEPS A PASTOR AWAKE ¹

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To keep fresh ministers must read. Rick Warren once wrote: ²

“If you’ve ever been to Israel, you know there’s a real contrast between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. The Sea of Galilee is full of water and full of life. There are trees and vegetation. They still do commercial fishing there. But the Dead Sea is just that – dead. There are no fish in it and no life around it. The Sea of Galilee is at the top of Israel and receives waters from the mountains of Lebanon. They all come into the top of it and then it gives out at the bottom. That water flows down through the Jordan River and enters into the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea takes in but it never gives out. That’s why it’s stagnant. The point is, there must be a balance in our lives to stay fresh with both input and output. There’s got to be an inflow and an outflow.... Most Christians get too much input and not enough output. They attend Bible study after Bible study. They’re always taking in but they’re never doing any ministry. The problem we pastors and church leaders face is the opposite. You’re always giving out, and if you don’t get input, you’ll dry up.”

Centuries ago Solomon began his collection of proverbs by highlighting the importance of wisdom: “A wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel” (Prov 1.5 AV) – or in the NRSV translation: “Let the wise hear and gain in learning and the discerning acquire skill”. It is true that in the first place these words are an encouragement to read the proverbs Solomon had collected - “There’s something here also for seasoned men and women, still a thing or two for the experienced to learn” (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*). However, this injunction can be applied to the reading of books in general. Indeed, A.W. Tozer based a sermon on Prov 1.5 entitled ‘Read or get out of ministry’, words taken from advice by John Wesley to his young ministers.

Tozer also quoted an American Indian preacher, who encouraged his hearers to improve their minds for the honour of God by saying: “When you are chopping wood and you have a dull axe you must work all the harder to cut the log. A sharp axe makes easy work. So sharpen your axe all you can”. Or in the words of Oswald Sanders, a past leader of the Overseas Missionary Fellowship:

“The man who desires to grow spiritually and intellectually will be constantly at his books. The lawyer who desires to succeed in his profession must keep abreast of important cases and changes in the law. The medical practitioner must follow the constantly changing discoveries in his field. Even so the spiritual leader must master God’s Word and its principles, and know as well what is going on in the minds of those who look to him for guidance. To achieve these ends, he must, hand in hand with his personal contacts, engage in a course of selective reading”. ³

¹ Paul Beasley-Murray, January 2016

² Rick Warren, *To be a great leader, you absolutely must be a reader* (October 23, 2014)

³ Oswald Sanders *Spiritual Leadership* (Marshall Morgan & Scott, London 1967), 95

It was precisely with this understanding of the importance of continuing learning that ministers used to call the room in which they worked their 'study'. Today many ministers refer to their place of work as their 'office' (which derives from a Latin word referring to the 'performance of a task' – I fear that this change of terminology points to a different understanding of ministry. As John Stott reflected: "Many are essentially administrators, whose symbols are the office rather than the study, and the telephone [now we should say 'the computer'] rather than the Bible".⁴

Ministers need to read. In the first place they need to read and study their Bibles. However, they also need to read and study more broadly. C.H. Spurgeon had a large personal library and believed passionately in the importance of reading. Commenting on Paul's words to Timothy, "Bring the books, and above all the parchments" (2 Tim 4:13), Spurgeon wrote: "He is inspired, yet he wants books. He has been preaching at least thirty years, yet he wants books. He's seen the Lord, yet he wants books. He's had a wider experience than most men, yet he wants books. He's been caught up to heaven and has heard things that are unlawful to utter, yet he wants books. He's written a major part of the New Testament, yet he wants books."

To return to Rick Warren: "Leaders are readers. Every leader is a reader. Not all readers are leaders but all leaders are readers. A lot of people read but they're not leaders. If you're going to lead, you've got to be thinking further in advance than the people that you're leading." Warren advanced four reasons for reading: 1. We must read for inspiration and motivation; 2. We must read to sharpen our skills; 3. We must read to learn from others; and 4. We must read to stay current in a changing world. Notice too that Warren did not have in mind ministers simply reading Christian books. We need to be in touch with the world in which we live.

If a book a week seems too ambitious an aim, then what about at least one book a month? Sadly, not even what I would regard as the minimum is the norm. For many life seems too busy. But at the end of the day it is surely a question of priorities. If something is important, there is always time.

Oswald Sanders suggested that every minister should 'determine' (I like that word) to spend a minimum of half-an-hour a day in reading. John Stott expected more of ministers. He used to say, "Every day at least one hour; every week one morning, afternoon, or evening; every month a full day; every year a week. Set out like this it sounds very little. . . . Yet everybody who tries it is surprised to discover how much reading can be done within such a disciplined framework. It totals up to nearly 600 hours in the course of a year".⁵ (

Ultimately ministers need to develop a pattern which works for them. I think of a minister friend who used to get up at 5 o'clock every morning to read for an hour or so before the day began. Fred Craddock, a distinguished American Methodist, wrote: "The person who has a comfortable chair in a quiet corner beside which is always a book with a marker and who reads 20 minutes after dinner and before retiring will read dozens of books each year".

⁴ John Stott *I Believe in Preaching*, (Hodder & Stoughton, London)124.

⁵ John Stott, *I believe in Preaching* 127,

⁶). In my own case, when as a young minister in Manchester I found myself having to travel down frequently to London for denominational committee meetings, I would always bring a pile of books onto the train and as a result got through many hours of reading. Some ministers finding it difficult to read at home go away every year for a reading week, either alone or with a group of peers.

‘A book a week keeps a minister awake’. Despite all the pressures on them, ministers need to make time to read – for their own pleasure, for their own profit, and for the sake of the people they serve.

⁶ Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Abingdon, Nashville 2nd edition 2000) 79.