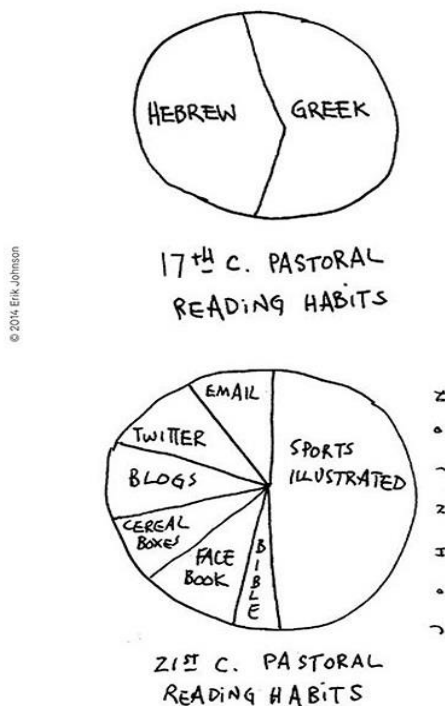


'The reading habits of Baptist Ministers', Baptist Ministers Journal 347 (July 2020) 22-30

Paul Beasley-Murray

Do ministers still read? Is it significant that in recent years a number of British Christian publishing houses have gone to the wall, while of those who have survived, some have given up publishing serious books, and others seem to make their money by publishing the religious 'blockbusters'. Was there any truth in a 2014 *Christianity Today* cartoon by Erik Johnson, in which, the Bible apart, books do not feature at all?



In March 2017, with the help of Peter Thomas (a Baptist minister) and Steve Smith (a retired geography teacher used to encouraging students to devise surveys), I decided to seek an answer to the question by sending out two surveys, one shorter and one longer, to 1900+ Baptist ministers, and received in reply 309 responses to the shorter survey and 175 to the longer survey. On the basis of that study I wrote a scholarly article, 'Ministers Reading Habits' published in the *Baptist Quarterly* 49 [1] (January 2018). The full analysis of the surveys together with my reflections are found on my website:

www.paulbeasleymurray.com/reading. In this article I want to look at how much ministers read, what they read, and how they might find more time for reading.

Some ministers read a good deal

In the longer survey ministers were asked “About how many hours do you spend in an average week reading – including not just print and digital, but also articles, blogs and websites?”, the following answers were received:

- 1-3 hours 12%
- 4-6 hours 19%
- 7-9 hours 23%
- 10-12 hours 20%
- 13-15 hours 12%
- More than 15 hours 15%

Stated in another way: just over half (54%) of all the ministers in the survey spend fewer than 10 hours a week reading, and almost three-quarters (74%) fewer than 13 hours.

Ministers have to balance their reading

In the longer survey ministers were asked: “Approximately what percentage of areas was spent in different areas of reading?”

	0-20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80%	81-100%
Personal Bible reading	64%	30%	3%	2%	1%
Reading for sermon prep	27%	49%	20%	4%	--
Other ministry-related rdng	51%	33%	14%	2%	--
General reading	52%	39%	7%	2%	--

Ministers have varied patterns for their personal reading of the Bible

In response to the question “What scheme(s) are you currently using for your reading of the Bible?”, the following answers were received in the longer survey:

The Lectionary	13%
Printed Bible reading notes	19%
Online Bible notes/devotional thoughts	19%
Reading through a Bible book with a commentary	19%
Reading through a Bible book without a commentary or notes	36%
I don't have a regular pattern of reading	19%

The figures would suggest that a few ministers are using more than one scheme.

The response which causes the greatest concern is that almost one fifth of ministers have no

regular pattern of reading the Bible. This is a travesty of a minister's calling. Ministers need to commit themselves to the daily discipline of a 'rule of life', of which the systematic reading of Scripture is central

Should we also be concerned that only 13% of ministers enjoy a rich and balanced diet of Scripture? For this is the great advantage of using a lectionary for personal Bible reading: it provides daily readings from the Old and New Testaments as also from the Psalms.

Ministers read widely

In the shorter survey ministers were asked "In the last year what types of ministry books have you been reading?". The answers were as follows:

Biblical studies	82% [of ministers]
Prayer and spirituality	66%
Theology	66%
Mission/outreach/evangelism	61%
Leadership and management	55%
Church history/Christian biography:	41%
Community involvement/justice issues	36%
Pastoral care and counselling	36%
Preaching	32%
Worship	23%
Specialised ministries - children/youth/ Families/chaplaincy	17%
'Other'	9%

It was not surprising that Biblical studies was the most popular type of book ministers were reading – with the pressure of weekly sermons and sometimes mid-week Bible studies, this would have been expected. What is perhaps surprising is that 'prayer and spirituality' ranked second alongside 'theology'. Yet, as we have seen, despite this interest in spirituality, the discipline of personal Scripture reading appears not to be strong. Or is the lack of disciplined reading of the Scriptures an outcome of some forms of contemporary spirituality? Whereas in traditional Catholic spirituality *lectio divina* (meditation on Scripture) has always played a key role, in some modern expressions of spirituality Scripture is down-played. So in the work-book which accompanies *Breathing under Water: Spirituality and the Twelve Steps* by the Franciscan Richard Rohr, not one of the 100 plus exercises involves reflecting on Scripture.¹ Similarly in *Soulfulness: Deepening the Mindful Life* by Brian Draper, a British evangelical, Scripture has no place in his 'journey into soul'.² By contrast

¹ Richard Rohr, *Breathing under Water: Companion Volume* (SPCK, London 2016).

² Brian Draper, *Soulfulness: Deepening the Mindful Life* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 2016).

Alister McGrath made the point that “The sola scriptura principle, so central to the theological method of the reformers, is equally evident in their spirituality. Scripture is the supreme God-authorised and God-given resource for the generation and nourishment of Christian faith”.³

As might be expected amongst a largely evangelical denomination, the reading of books on ‘mission/outreach/evangelism’ was relatively high (61%), but it was pleasing to note that with over a third (36%) of ministers having read books on ‘community involvement/justice issues’, Baptists have developed a much more holistic approach to mission.

It was good to see that in the past year over half (55%) have read books in leadership and management, for studies have shown that effective leadership is the key to the health and growth of the church.⁴ However, it was strange to see the relatively low ranking of pastoral care and counselling (36%), preaching (32%) and worship (23%). That fewer ministers read about worship almost certainly reflects the way in which in many Baptist churches worship is now the prerogative of worship leaders rather than of the ministers themselves.

Most ministers favour print books to digital reading

What impact has the digital revolution had on ministers reading? To find out, we asked several questions. In the short survey of 309 ministers we asked, “How often do you use a digital device in your reading?”

Almost always	6%
Most of the time:	10%
About 50/50	35%
Occasionally	40%
Never	9%

Here we see that only 16% use a digital device ‘almost always’ or ‘most of the time’, compared to 49% who only ‘occasionally’ or ‘never’ use a digital device.

We then asked a question relating to the proportion of digital and print books read in the last three months:

Almost all e-books	3%
Mainly e-books	7%
Roughly 50/50:	18%
Mainly print books	29%
Almost all print books	40%

³ Alister McGrath, *Roots that Refresh: A celebration of Reformation spirituality* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1991) 34.

⁴ See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Living Out the Call: Book Two – Leading God’s People* (Amazon, 2nd edition 2016).

Here only 10% read “almost all” or mainly” e-books, whereas 69% read “mainly” or “almost all” print books. Most clearly favour print books to digital reading.⁵

Most ministers particularly favour print books when preparing sermons

Regarding Bible study and/or sermon preparation a series of questions were asked relating to the frequency of use of print books, digital e-reader, TV/radio, down-loads, and websites, and came up with the following results

	<i>Print books</i>	<i>Digital e-reader</i>	<i>TV/radio</i>	<i>Down-loads</i>	<i>Web-sites</i>
Always:	51%	7%	Less than 1%	9%	15%
Often:	29%	15%	20%	32%	39%
50/50	12%	8%	17%	18%	24%
Rarely	7%	29%	46%	32%	19%
Never	less than 1%	41%	20%	11%	3%

Here 80% always and often use print books in their sermon preparation.

Ministers are more open to digital media for reading related to their personal ministry development

Regarding personal ministry development, we asked the same series of questions, and came up with the following results

	<i>Print books</i>	<i>Digital e-reader</i>	<i>TV/radio</i>	<i>Down-loads</i>	<i>Web-sites</i>
Always	37%	6%	2%	5%	9%
Often	41%	20%	14%	25%	33%
50/50	15%	13%	16%	24%	30%
Rarely	6%	30%	47%	34%	24%
Never	0%	31%	21%	13%	4%

Print books remain dominant: 78% “always” or “often” rely on print books for their ministry development. By contrast the percentages for those who “always” or “often” reliant on other media are as follows: web-sites 42%; downloads 30%; digital readers 26%; and TV/radio 16%.

Time and other priorities

In the shorter survey ministers were asked: “What restricts your ministry-related reading?” A variety of reasons were given:

⁵ A Bible Society on-line survey of 2,294 Christians in April 2013 revealed that 8 out of 10 Christians preferred using a physical book, compared with 7 out of 10 (69%) of the public – but that was 5 years ago!

Demands of ministry	46%
Other priorities	25%
Time management	15%
Not a reader	2%
Other	12%

That almost two-thirds of ministers (71%) are restricted from ministry-related reading because of “demands of ministry” and “other priorities” is a significant finding. However, I wonder if the 15% who referred to difficulties of “time management” might have made an even more significant response. Good time management involves setting priorities, which once set give the minister the freedom to say ‘no’ to many of the demands made upon them.

The response of the 25% who cited “other priorities” for restricting their reading may also be significant - for the inference is that there are other tasks which take priority over reading and study. But is that so? Clearly if someone is dying or has just died, then a minister will want to drop everything and be there with the person. However, I would argue that in the overall pattern of a minister’s life, the spiritual discipline of reading and study is a key priority – in Gordon MacDonald’s phrase, it is “building below the waterline”.⁶

Many ministers do not set aside specific time in the week for reading relating to ministry

In the same shorter survey ministers were asked terms of “How much time are you able presently to set aside for reading related to your ministry?” (i.e. not general reading such as novels or poetry). The responses were as follows:

- None 2%
- Irregular – as opportunity arises 53%
- One session – about three hours 24%
- Two sessions – about six hours 18%
- One day a month 5%

Here we discover that only 42% of ministers are able to devote specific time to ministry-related reading, and that even then it is no more than 6 hours a week. I wonder, is this failure to find time to read linked with the trend for ministers not to have ‘studies’, but to have ‘offices’? This may be related to the way many (most?) ministers today do not

⁶ This metaphor is taken from a reflection on the Brooklyn Bridge, which joins Manhattan to Brooklyn. “The Brooklyn Bridge remains a major transportation artery in New York City today because 135 years ago the chief engineer and his construction team did their most patient and daring work where no one could see it: on the foundations of the towers below the water-line. It is one more illustration of an ageless principle in leadership: the work done below the waterline (in a leader’s soul) that determines whether he or she will stand the test of time and challenge...”. See Gordon MacDonald, *Building Below the Waterline* (Hendrickson, Peabody, Massachusetts 2011) 1.

safeguard the mornings for study on the basis that they need to relate with people at other morning activities such as a toddler group or a church café.

Most ministers do not avail themselves of a reading week

In the Baptist Union's recommended terms of settlement, in addition to five weeks of holiday, ministers are entitled to a week of study or reading. Bearing in mind that during the working year just over half of ministers are unable to set aside specific time for reading relating to study, one might think that most would be keen to take advantage of the yearly reading week. However, this is not the case.

In answer to the question, "Over the last three years or so how many reading weeks (or equivalent) have you taken?", the responses of the 300 ministers replying to this question in the shorter survey were as follows:

None:	56%
One:	15%
Two:	10%
Three	20%

This decision not to take advantage of a reading week stands in contrast to one of the ordination questions asked of past generations of Baptist ministers: "Do you promise to be faithful in prayer and in the reading and study of the Holy Scriptures, and to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called".⁷ In the most recent Baptist manual, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* that promise is absent in the main ordination promises, although an expanded version appears in the section entitled 'Additional Material: "Will you endeavour to lead a godly life... and will you be diligent in prayer, in reading the Scriptures and in all the studies that will deepen your faith and ministry".⁸ If ministers do not feel it important to take an annual reading week then we might well wonder how seriously ministers feel it is to grow and develop in their thinking and understanding of their calling.

A practical way forward: adopt a strategy for reading

On the whole, ministers will only find time to read, if they make time – and that takes effort. Indeed, Martyn Lloyd Jones, the former great Welsh preacher of Westminster Chapel, commented that: "one literally has to fight for one's life in this sense"⁹

⁷ Ernest A. Payne & Stephen F. Winward, *Orders and Prayers for Church Worship: A Manual for Ministers* (The Baptist Union of Great Britain & Ireland, London, 4th edition 1967) 219.

⁸ Christopher J. Ellis and Myra Blyth, editors, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples* (Canterbury Press, Norwich 2005) 131.

⁹ Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Preaching and the Preachers* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1971) 67.

According to John Stott, the former Rector of All Soul's, Langham Place, an hour a day is an "absolute minimum for time for study which even the busiest pastors should be able to manage". He went on:

"Many will achieve more. But the minimum would amount to this: 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, indeed, it is too 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 six hundred hours in the course of a year".¹⁰

John Piper, who for more than 30 years was the pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minnesota, suggested that if pastors could not block out an hour, then they could set aside 20 minutes early in the morning, 20 minutes after lunch, and 20 minutes before they went to bed: "Think what you could read! Thirty-six medium-sized books!"¹¹

In the last 21 years of my ministry, my strategy was a mixture of Stott and Piper. Monday afternoons tended to be devoted to reading commentaries, with more time spent on Tuesday morning when I began the task of writing my sermon. Wednesdays and Thursdays I sought to read for at least an hour a day in my church office – but would often squeeze in more time at home before going out in the evening. Fridays afternoons were normally spent reviewing books (a quick reader, I would manage to 'gut' around some 180 books a year in that way). The church gave me four weeks a year for 'wider ministry', some of which was devoted to reading in preparation for the lectures I was to give or the books I was to write.

I always enjoyed reading *Ministry Today UK* and the *Baptist Ministers Journal*. I enjoyed too *Future First; Providing Facts for Forward Planning*, a newsletter edited by the indefatigable Peter Brierley.

As a long-time member of the 'Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas' and of the Tyndale Fellowship for Biblical Research I received *New Testament Studies* and the *Tyndale Bulletin* – two worthy scholarly journals, which have limited relevance to pastoral ministry. Much more relevant are the 28-page long Grove Booklets of Cambridge – I greatly benefitted from their various series on such subjects as Evangelism, Leadership, Pastoral and Worship matters.

For life beyond the church, I take *The Times* – I read the *Daily Mail* at the dentist's, and the *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun*, and *The Star* at the car wash! For relaxation I am an avid reader of 'thrillers' – on a recent cruise we took away with us one whole suitcase packed with books!

¹⁰ John R.W. Stott, *I Believe in Preaching* (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1982) 204.

¹¹ John Piper, Brothers, *We Are Not Professionals* (B & H Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 2nd edition 2013) 81.

Reading alone does not make for effective ministry

To those ministers who may feel that I have over-emphasised the importance of reading, let me say that I recognise that there is more to effective ministry than reading. Effective ministry is determined by many factors. For instance, ministers who read for hours a week, but never get out into the wider community are unlikely to make a significant difference. Likewise ministers who never miss a reading week, but who are not natural communicators, may not hold a congregation in the same way that some of their more gifted peers may do. However, there is no doubt that ministers who read are likely to be much more effective than if they had not devoted themselves to the discipline of reading.

Francis Bacon, the English philosopher, famously said “reading maketh a full man”.¹² In turn I would say that reading makes a ‘complete minister’. Or to quote John Wesley, “It cannot be that ministers should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading. A reading ministry will always be a knowing ministry”.¹³

¹² Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Studies*.

¹³ I have taken the liberty of altering the actual quotation: “It cannot be that the people should grow in grace unless they give themselves to reading. A reading people will always be a knowing people.”