The Pastor and His Reading: Why You Are the Key to Building a Church That Loves Books
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Purpose: Lay out a very brief but foundational theology of literacy, built from the supremacy of Christ in all things, leading to a discovery of genuine literary pleasure, with a transition to address the importance of book reading as a discipline, and concluding with 14 quick practical suggestions for pastors as they seek to model and encourage healthy Christ-centered literacy in the local church.

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INTRODUCTION

A few years back a young man came to me, asking me for help with his reading. I said, “Sure, let me collect my thoughts, and we’ll meet at a coffee shop to talk.” We did. But that meeting started me down a path, and the questions kept coming to me, questions about reading that I needed to personally answer. That meeting led to me think about writing my thoughts out in a few pages, and that led to more and more thoughts that eventually led me to believe that a whole book could be written about a Christian approach to literacy.

My thoughts about reading the Bible spilled over into my thoughts on reading Christian books and theology, and that led me into thinking about what a Christian reader should be thinking when they open classic literature, or books off the bestseller list, or really any book shelved at Barnes & Noble.

The fruit of many months of asking questions — and trying to find answers — eventually resulted in my book Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books. It was in the process of writing that book that I came to discover how much I had personally assumed about books and literacy. But what really frightened me was what I most assumed in my life — and most overlooked in my life — and that was a proper theology of reading in the first place.

So this message this afternoon is part of what I discovered over those many months of rethinking literacy.

I want to divide this message into two parts. In the first half I want us to develop together a theology of reading. We only have time to look at some of the big pillar foundations under reading — but those few pillars are the critical ones. And in the second half of this message I want to look at the pastoral implications of what this theology of reading calls for. First half — theology. Second half — practical suggestions for pastors.

Hopefully this leaves some time for questions and answers at the end of our hour together.
These notes will be made available online later.

Here we go.

**A THEOLOGY OF READING**

I’ll begin with a definition. What do I mean by *literacy*?

*Literacy is the act of reading books through a Christ-centered worldview, with the aim of discovering truth, goodness and beauty, leading to life change, pleasure and worship.*

As you will see in a moment, I do not make a hard and fast distinction between literacy related to Bible reading and literacy related to all other books.

**Illiteracy in the Life of Israel**

There are two key passages for understanding Christ’s influence on literacy.

One of the most important events in the history of publishing took place in the book of Exodus when God put pen to paper — or finger to stone — and wrote and published the Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18). That day on Sinai, God published, he became an author, and literacy was forever changed.

We’ll pick up the story in **2 Corinthians 3:7–4:6 ...**

3:7 Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, 8 will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? 9 For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. 10 Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. 11 For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

12 Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, 13 not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. 14 But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. 15 Yes, to this day **whenever Moses is read** a veil lies over their hearts. 16 But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. 17 Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

4:1 Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. 2 But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. 3 And even if our gospel is veiled,
it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Paul’s main point here: New Covenant pastoral ministry is a remarkable privilege in redemptive history.

Two verses really stand out here — 2 Corinthians 3:15 and 4:6. 2 Corinthians 3:15 is a critical verse in the Bible in exposing the difference between spiritual literacy and spiritual illiteracy. There is a way of reading that is veiled to Christ and therefore is really a form of spiritual illiteracy. 2 Corinthians 4:6 is critical for understanding the power of Christ in illumining lives.

And I don’t speak here as an outsider looking in, I say this as a recovering Pharisee who knows exactly what this is like. For years, until the Lord converted me at age 21, I saw nothing but commandments and imperatives in the Bible.

Illiteracy in the Life of One Ethiopian

The frightening principle of 2 Corinthians 3:15 played out in my own life, and here’s how this gets played out in the life of another man. Turn in your Bible to Acts 8:26–35.

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. 27 And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29 And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” 30 So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31 And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. 32 Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.
33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.”

34 And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

Every week there are people coming to your churches who cannot make sense of the Bible —
they are saying “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Never assume that because people are literate that they know how to read.

The hermeneutical “aha moment” came when the Ethiopian beheld the glory of Christ in Scripture. The most important man in this passage is Jesus. The Ethiopian did not merely need a teacher; he needed a Savior. And so do we, and so does every person in our churches.

Here’s the takeaway point: The Ethiopian eunuch was technically literate — he could certainly read a written text. In fact, given his rank, his literacy skills were probably of an elite caliber compared to the culture around him. Astonishingly to me, this man possessed a copy of Isaiah, which means he had unprecedented access to literature. But without Christ, this Ethiopian man was functionally spiritually illiterate.

And there was little hope that this man would discover in his commute what, or whom, Isaiah was talking about.

**Life and Death Literacy**

What we discover when we put these two texts together is that it does not matter if you are an heir to God’s religious tradition, or an assistant to a pagan princess — separated from Christ, the soul is functionally illiterate (2 Corinthians 3:14, Acts 8:30–31, see Isaiah 29:11–12).

We are pressing into the very heart of literacy here.

Christ continues to be the key to literacy in the ultimate aim and purpose and design of God in literacy. Once we have seen “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,” we never read anything the same way again.

Which means true literacy — the Christ-centered literacy I’m talking about here — is a matter of Christ or no Christ, a matter of heaven or hell, a matter of spiritual life or spiritual death. Literacy was not given to God so that we would have something to do to kill time on the subway. God’s highest purpose in giving us language and literacy is that the bright white light of his glory would shine off the face of Jesus Christ, through the pages we read, into our hearts, to illuminate our lives.

Or to say it another way, there’s a literacy that leads to eternal life, and there’s an ill-literacy that leads to death.

But what about a math textbook, or a novel, or a business book? We’re moving in that direction.

It all centers on Christ, the Incarnate Word. He is the center of all literacy. —

- John 14:17 — Jesus Christ says he is truth.
- Ephesians 4:21 — The truth is in Jesus.
Colossians 1:15–17 — “[Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Christ is the center of all universal reality.

Colossians 2:2–3 — “Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

Ephesians 3:4 — “When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ.” True literacy is the mechanism of discovering Christ, who is all truth.

Which means, pastor, if you want to build a church that loves to read, that loves books, you must first labor — by God’s grace alone — to pass to your people a love for the supremacy of Jesus Christ in all things, and especially a supremacy of Christ in their reading diet.

Or to say this another way, a church that fails to see the supremacy of Christ in all things, will never learn to love reading and literacy as God intended.

And, I would argue Christ is not merely the key to understanding our Bibles, I believe Christ is the key to understanding all books.

We have found ourselves walking out into an ocean of profundity, and I want us to take a couple more steps out into the deep ocean waters and talk about reading as a pleasure.

**THE PLEASURE OF READING**

Closely related to a definition of literacy is an understanding of reading pleasure. The two concepts are inseparable really.

We know pleasures are powerful things. God-centered pleasures are very glorious things. Fleeting pleasures are very dangerous things. Worldly pleasures, godless pleasures, are destructive forces (2 Timothy 3:4). And so whenever we talk about pleasures we need to be clear and careful.

The literacy I am here talking about — Christ-centered literacy — is the key to genuine literary delight, the highest literary delight. And to talk about the pleasures of reading drives us back to Scripture.

True literacy pleasure has at its foundation the miraculous act of God in making dead sinners alive. In regeneration, the soul’s palate comes alive to God’s truth, goodness, and beauty. And what is false, evil, and morally ugly becomes increasingly disgusting. Sanctification is the process of working these things out more and more, but the change fundamentally happens in regeneration.

In regeneration, the poles of existence change from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness, through the all-embracing and all-transforming principles of faith. Christ’s work, Person, and words begin to dominate our convictions, our affections, and our active desires. Or as Paul
says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

In other words, in regeneration the appetites and affections begin to orient around God.

Paul says the most profound words: “We have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16). The entire Christian life orients toward Christ — toward his thinking, towards his truth, towards his goodness, and towards his beauty. This is why regeneration unlocks delight in our literary experience, and it explains why we read what we read in Psalms 19 and 119 about God’s written word.

- **Psalm 19:9–10** – “the rules of the Lord are true, / and righteous altogether. / More to be desired are they than gold, / even much fine gold; / sweeter also than honey / and drippings of the honeycomb.”
- **Psalm 119:102–104** – “I do not turn aside from your rules, / for you have taught me. / How sweet are your words to my taste, / sweeter than honey to my mouth! / Through your precepts I get understanding; / therefore I hate every false way.”

Speaking of Psalm 119, C. S. Lewis wrote: “this is the language of a man ravished by moral beauty.” Yes, this is the language of a man ravished by the written words of God.

“Sweeter than honey” means we are talking about emotions of joy and delight and pleasure. Here we find the most profound statements of literary pleasure we can find.

Why? Because these rules are **his** rules, **God’s** rules. Note the personal language in Psalm 119 especially.

[Here at this point we could talk for another hour on God’s delight in personified Wisdom, as we read about in Proverbs 8:22–31, and especially verse 30. And we could then connect that delight in Wisdom to the Father’s daily delight in his Son (Matthew 3:17). Thus, I think we could arrive at a place where a case can be made for the literary beauty of the commands and proverbs of God based upon the reality that those commands and proverbs cannot be separated from the eternal being of the Son, Jesus Christ.]

But here are more passages that speak in blunt language of the literary delight of Scripture.

- God commissioned the **prophet Ezekiel** by calling him to take and eat his words — and the words were sweet (Ezekiel 3:1–3).
- God commissioned the **prophet Jeremiah** by calling him to take and eat his words — and the words were sweet (Jeremiah 15:16).
- An angel commissions the **Apostle John** by calling him to take and eat God’s words — and the words were sweet (Revelation 10:9–10).

None of their messages were gentle and kind, however. But they were sweet, and they were sweet because they were true, and they were true because they were from God.
But however we define literary pleasure — it must be centered on God’s pleasures, on his reality, on his truth, on his goodness, and on his beauty.

What’s clear is that God’s words of truth — even his commands — are sweet to the reborn literary palate.

Let’s press in a little more, because now we are arriving at the question that has been driving at all along.

**Why Does the Gospel Make Book Lovers Out of Us?**

Okay, so you’re saying: I get it, I’m convinced why Scripture is sweet, but what about other books? This seminar is about building a church that loves books, plural.

Does all this talk about Christian literacy mean reading a book just for fun is pure vanity?

The quick answer is, no. We are told to enjoy the fruit of our toil (Ecclesiastes 5:18), and one way I personally do that is by going home in the evening after a hard day and reading a novel by British humorist P. G. Wodehouse. And I don’t have time to develop the thought in this message, C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* talks about the spiritual value of reading things merely for pleasure.¹

A few questions emerge at this point. Does Christ-centered literacy mean ...

- we read only propositionally-driven, non-fiction books?
- we read only our Bibles?
- we read only Christian books?

These are good questions. Let’s press in a little more here.

How does the gospel make us lovers of books, plural?

Let me see if I can start pulling all our themes together.

- We have discovered that in regeneration, the supremacy of Christ awakens true literacy.
- We have discovered that to the regenerated palate, God’s commands become pleasurable.
- This is true because, in regeneration, the Person of Christ re-orient our affections to delight in what is true, good, and beautiful — namely, himself.
- **In other words Christ-centered literacy is feeding on what is true, good, and beautiful.**
- **Thus the gospel makes us lovers of all that is true, good, and beautiful.**

Christ, Our Literary Keystone and Sun

Let me say this another way — or, I’ll let Robert Murray McCheyne say it. The 19th century pastor, preacher, and poet said it like this in one of his sermons.

The whole Bible, and the whole of experience, bear witness that by nature we are ignorant of the truth. No doubt there are many truths which an unconverted man does know. He may know the truths of mathematics and arithmetic — he may know many of the common every-day truths; but still it cannot be said that an unconverted man knows the truth, for Christ is the truth.

Christ may be called the keystone of the arch of truth. Take away the keystone of an arch, and the whole becomes a heap of rubbish. The very same stones may be there; but they are all fallen, smothered, and confused — without order, without end. Just so take Christ away, and the whole arch of truth becomes a heap of rubbish. The very same truths may be there; but they are all fallen — without coherence, without order, without end.

Christ may be called the sun of the system of truth. Take away the sun out of our system, and every planet would rush into confusion. The very same planets would be there; but their conflicting forces would draw them hither and thither, orb dashing against orb in endless perplexity. Just so take Christ away, and the whole system of truth rushes into confusion.

The same truths may be in the mind, but all conflicting and jarring in inextricable mazes; for “the path of the wicked is as darkness; they know not at what they stumble.” But let Christ be revealed to an unconverted soul — let it not be merely a man speaking about Christ unto him, but let the Spirit of God reveal Him — and there is revealed, not a truth, but the truth. You put the keystone into the arch of truth; you restore the sun to the center of the system. All truth becomes orderly and serviceable in that mind. ...

My friends, have you seen Christ, who is the truth? Has He been revealed to you, not by flesh and blood, but by the Spirit of our God? Then you know how true it is that in Him “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” — that He is the “Alpha and Omega,” the beginning and the ending of all knowledge.

But if you have not seen Christ, then you know nothing yet as you ought to know; all your knowledge is like a bridge without a keystone — like a system without a sun. What good will it do you in hell that you knew all the sciences in the world, all the events of history, and all the busy politics of your little day? Do you not know that your very knowledge will be turned into an instrument of torture in hell? Oh, how will you wish in that day that you had read your newspaper less and your Bible more — that
with all your getting, you had got understanding — that with all your knowledge, you had known the Saviour, whom to know is life everlasting!\(^2\)

First, Christian writers do not have a corner on truth, goodness, and beauty. Notice that in orienting the universe of our lives to Christ, we do not then say the Bible is the only book we read. We say the Bible, as a revelation of our Christ, centers everything else.

This is a key point. It opens up a whole new conversation about how a non-Christian can perceive and write about truth, goodness, and beauty (a question I attempt to explain in chapter 5 of Lit!).

We are only ready to walk into Barnes & Noble, or any other bookstore, once Christ has become the keystone of our worldview, and once Christ has become the sun on our universe of books.

This is true Christian literacy.

**Gospel Generous Readers**

Maybe the best articulation of how the gospel unleashes a literary appetite comes from a book written by a favorite 19\(^{th}\) century Dutch theologian named Herman Bavinck. In his book *Our Reasonable Faith* he writes this:

> It is not the sparkling firmament, nor mighty nature, nor any prince or genius of the earth, nor any philosopher or artist, but the Son of man that is the highest revelation of God. Christ is the Word become flesh, which in the beginning was with God and which was God, the Only-Begotten of the Father, the Image of God, the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person; who has seen Him has seen the Father (John 14:9). In that faith the Christian stands. He has learned to know God in the person of Jesus Christ whom God has sent. God Himself, who said that the light should shine out of the darkness, is the One who has shined in His heart in order to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

But from this high vantage point the Christian looks around him, forwards, backwards, and to all sides. And if, in doing so, in the light of the knowledge of God, which he owes to Christ, he lets his eyes linger on nature and on history, on heaven and on earth, then he discovers traces everywhere of that same God whom he has learned to know and to worship in Christ as his Father. The Sun of righteousness opens up a wonderful vista to him which stretches out to the ends of the earth. By its light he sees backwards into the night of past times, and by it he penetrates through to the future of all things. Ahead of him and behind the horizon is clear, even though the sky is often obscured by clouds.

The Christian, who sees everything in the light of the Word of God, is anything but narrow in his view. He is generous in heart and mind. He looks over the whole earth and reckons it all his own, because he is Christ’s and Christ is God’s (1 Corinthians 3:21–23). He cannot let go his belief that the revelation of God in Christ, to which he owes his life and salvation, has a special character. This belief does not exclude him from the world, but rather puts him in position to trace out the revelation of God in nature and history, and puts the means at his disposal by which he can recognize the true and the good and the beautiful and separate them from the false and sinful alloys of men.3

The gospel does not close us down to the world; the gospel gives us eyes to discerningly be generous with the world around us. This is true Christian literacy.

**In Your Light We See Light**

Again, by saying the key to literacy is the discovery of the supremacy of Christ in all things, we are not saying that the Christian reads only the Bible, or only books by Christian authors.

John Broadus, the famous homiletics professor at Southern Seminary, in his study of the history of preaching said this about two early church fathers: “Chrysostom and Augustine speak not so much as loving pagan writers less, but as loving the Scriptures more.”4 That is wise. To exalt the Bible as God’s inerrant truth, doesn’t necessitate that we diminish the truth, goodness, and beauty we find in other books.

We do not say, we have a Bible, therefore we read no other books — no. We have a Bible and in the Bible we find a gospel, and that gospel we find the Person of Jesus Christ who is truth, goodness, and beauty. He is the keystone that holds up all our other reading — he is the sun that makes sense of our universe of book reading.

The glory of God shines in the face of Jesus Christ. His face lights our lives. The Psalmist says of God in Psalm 36:9: “in your light do we see light.” The Christian says it this way: “In the light of Christ’s face do we see all other reflections of truth, goodness, and beauty in this world.” It all derives from him.

This is what makes Christians generous book readers.

**Christian Literacy in Barnes & Noble**

Christ orients our book universe. But what does this look like in practice? Let me provide a few examples:

- A novel that glorifies self-sacrifice as the greatest form of love is a beautiful novel, because it reflects Jesus.

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• A novel that makes adultery or fornication into a delicacy devoid of life-destroying consequences, contradicts the beauty of Christ’s holiness, and lies about the reality of sin’s consequences.
• A business book that encourages you to think of labor as a means of building personal wealth so that you can fritter your life away in self-indulgence, is a business book that contradicts the character of Jesus—it is an ugly book.
• A leadership book that says the best leaders are the ones who seek the welfare and success of others at personal cost, reflects the character of Christ and is beautiful.

And we could go on and on, book-by-book, section-by-section, through all the shelves of a local Barnes & Noble bookstore.

Here’s the point: The value of a book and the pleasures of literature are first and fundamentally determined in relation to the supremacy of Christ in all things. What reflects him is to be embraced and delighted in. What contradicts him is to be rejected. This orientation of all things to Christ makes us generous readers and provides the objective foundation for all our zeal in book reading. The most essential and foundational priority for any church that aspires to cultivate a climate of literacy — step one in creating a church that loves books — is the consistent preaching of the supremacy of Christ in all things.

Then you help people live out of that.

And that is exactly what marks many of you and your ministries.

Much more could be said here, but let’s transition to application.

THE DISCIPLINE OF READING

But we have still not talked about the discipline of reading. It’s one thing to be convinced of the power and importance of reading, and it is another thing to cultivate healthy, disciplined, reading habits in the local church.

Of course nothing in the Christian life is automatic — or certainly nothing in the Christian life that is a discipline is automatic. And that is true of reading.

And this, pastors, is where you come in (again).

Why Men Don’t Read Books

Just how literate is the Evangelical church today? I’m stunned at how little is written about this. There are few if any meaningful studies about literacy skills in the Evangelical church. We know that about 19% of Protestants read the Bible each day, and about 40% of Protestants read the Bible once a month or less.5

As I mentioned earlier, there’s antidotal evidence that literacy among men in the local church is not great. So clearly there’s a need for Christians to be encouraged as readers, but there’s little statistical evidence for it.

Nothing has the potential to encourage a local church to literacy more than a pastor who models it.

Here are some reasons why men don’t read (based on my own personal experience).

• **First, men don’t read books because they don’t know where to begin.** We live in a golden age of book publishing, which is great for the avid reader — but is overwhelming for many men.

• **Second, men don’t read books because visual allurements are more appealing.** Many men don’t read books for the simple fact that books cannot compete with the visual and passive entertainment the world offers.

• **Third, men don’t read books because they think it’s a waste of time.** Many men don’t read books because they are unconvinced that the time spent in a book is going to “do anything” to enhance their lives.

• **Fourth, men don’t read because they lack literary discipline.** Reading may be a hobby, but it is never less than a discipline. Reading well requires both focused attention and a time commitment.

In any given local church, a wise pastor possesses the single most valuable commodity that will influence men who don’t read books, and that commodity is *reading experience*.

• A wise pastor is a man who has learned by experience to discern valuable books from the less helpful (reason #1 above).

• A wise pastor is a man who has learned to fix his attention on the written word for lengthy periods of undistracted time (reasons #2 and #4).

• A wise pastor is a man who has been personally altered by his discoveries in the written word (reason #3).

Even without thinking about it, most faithful pastors are already pushing against each of these four cultural factors for why men don’t read books. In a visually-driven culture, the effective power of the written word shines in a pastor who has carefully meditated and read over his sermon text in Scripture.

How do you build a church that loves to read? You keep modeling it. Part of my aim in this message is to encourage you men about what many of you are already modeling as you preach and teach God’s Word.

14 PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR PASTORS

1. **Protect your own vicarious reading time.** Pastors, especially if you teach or preach every week, or at least in the weeks in which you do, you must protect a large block of time for reading. This is hard to protect for many of you — I know. But it’s critical. There are two ways
to read. You can read merely to entertain curiosity. Or you can read vicariously for the sake of others. Curiosity reading is not bad in itself, but as a pastor God has called you to read vicariously as a means of caring for others. Which means your own disciplined reading habits are a means of self-sacrifice for the health of others. When you are in your office reading books to care for your congregations, you are engaged in an incredibly fruitful and productive labor. Now, I was born blue collar and I know how many hurdles this poses. For some of you those are internal hurdles—if you read during your pastoral hours you feel guilty about it. You need to ask why you feel that way. And lets be honest, for those of you in churches with a lot of folks in blue collar work, it may be assumed that your time spent reading is not “doing anything.” It is. Productivity is hanging a sheet of drywall. Productivity is also finding a quote by Don Carson that vividly communicates the main point of your sermon. Both are productive.

2. Organize a reading group to fix something. But not a typical reading group. The typical reading group, at least the ones that come to my mind most immediately, are relatively subjective. These are groups that ask questions like: Did you like the book? Was it meaningful to you? What part of the book was most profound for you? Subjective reading groups like this are rarely effective at encouraging men to initially take up and read great books. Why’s that? Well, quite simply, it’s a guy thing. Effective reading groups for men need at the center of their gathering a purpose for reading. There needs to be a problem to solve. Any wise pastor will already be aware of theological weaknesses in himself, in his preaching, or in his church. He is also aware of pressing practical problems that need to be considered. A pastor can go and find a book that addresses these needs in his church, and then gather and meet and talk with men in the church about possible solutions. It’s a creative way to get men reading, and it was an idea suggested by Dr. Mohler in my recent interview with him. “Men first read books seriously to solve a problem, to find the answer to a need,” he said. “Something has to be a catalyst. What I seek to do is take young guys and say, ‘Read this because we are going to talk about it.’ Saying, ‘Read this book and see if you like it,’ is not enough.” Then he offered an example. In one church, a pastor picked 12 guys (who did not typically read books) to read through Wayne Grudem’s systematic theology (one chapter per week). It’s a long book, but it was doable because he suggested concrete areas in the church that needed clarity on a variety of topics. And it worked. Not only did it work, the influence of the reading group cascaded. The next year those 12 guys started their own reading groups, and tackled new problems and questions. The same happened the next year. Now after three years, 600 men have read through Grudem’s large theological work because one wise pastor invested in 12 men for a year. That is the powerful influence pastors have in the lives of men.

3. Address the allures of visual entertainment. Studies have shown that the more videogames you play and the more videos you watch does not necessarily correlate with decreased skill in reading. But, there is no need for a study to show us that the main forces in our lives that endanger our reading time are the challenges posed by visual allurements. This is why I announced the death of Dostoyevsky by Angry Birds. As e-book reading gravitates from an black-and-white eReader (like the original Kindle reader) to full-color tablets (like an iPad) the temptations of Twitter, or Facebook, or video games, or videos, will make it harder to read. There’s a certain level of discipline and sustained linear attention that good book reading requires from us that is endangered by the easy escapes into visual entertainment.

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We need to be aware of this temptation in our own lives, and help others in our churches become aware of this tension as well.

4. Read hard books (slowly). The way you read a blog post — or rather it may be more accurate to call this skim-reading a blog post — has a tendency to carry over into how we read books. I work in online media and I face this all the time. My online reading habits (which are not exactly healthy) bleed over into my offline reading habits. And when I find this is happening, I pick up the collected works of Shakespeare. In the edition I own, each arcane word is defined in the bottom of the page. And so I find that on the first read of a few lines are nothing more than trying to understand each word. Then I go back and reread those lines to get the thought. And then I go back and re-read the lines to get the flow. Then I move on and do the same with the next set of lines. After doing this for an hour it’s amazing how differently I read my Bible. Suddenly every word matters, I must know each word, then I must understand each sentence, then I must put together the flow of argument. In that sense, Shakespeare is my hermeneutical healer, and he helps me combat unhealthy online reading patterns that seep into my habits of offline book reading.

5. Make private opportunities to talk books with your church. Encouraging men to read is as simple as getting them into your own library. Show them the books that have helped you. Explain books, show them how you have organized them, and even lend some. Pastors can assume that a large portion of the men in their church rarely observed their dads reading books, and as a result they are intimidated and often overwhelmed in a library. They need a mentor. Pastor, you can be that testimony, you can be that example, and you can be that life-changing mentor.

6. Illustrate sermon points with classic literature. Pastors can feel an enormous pressure to quote and illustrate sermons from the latest “reality” TV shows, popular movies, contemporary music, and YouTube videos. Why not pull illustrations from classic literature? To illustrate a sermon, look to the stories by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, or Shakespeare. Classic literature connects with people and provides a largely untapped storehouse of soul-stirring sermon illustrations. I know it’s a geeky trend right now for reformed pastors to read The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit, and really anything by Tolkien. But there’s something to be said for this. Two years back Scott Anderson interviewed Tim Keller — a DG Live recorded in Manhattan — and it was fascinating. Here’s what Keller said at one point:

    Tolkien has helped my imagination. He was a devout Catholic — and I am not. However, because he brought his faith to bear into narrative, fiction, and literature, his Christianity — which was pretty ‘mere Christianity’ (understanding of human sin, need for grace, need for redemption) — fleshed out in fiction, has been an inspiration to me. What I mean by inspiration is this: he gives me a way of grasping glory that would otherwise be hard for me to appreciate. Glory, weightiness, beauty, excellence, brilliance, virtue — he shows them to you in some of his characters. When people ask me how often I have read The Lord of the Rings, the answer is, I actually never stop. I’m always in it.

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7 The video is online: https://vimeo.com/48637040
Pastor, if you want to explain certain abstract qualities, take advice from Keller and look to fictional characters.

### 7. Pepper your sermon with direct quotes from Christian living books.
Many of the most profound excerpts from books that have shaped my own heart were excerpts carefully chosen and read verbally by a pastor in a sermon. Pastors who select and share key excerpts from books not only model the value of reading and encourage literacy, they make subtle book recommendations based on specific needs in the local church. But here’s the key: share quotes that have personally impacted you. In doing this you model the value of books for making life-changing personal discovery. That’s huge!

### 8. Start a church library or book table.
Make good books easily available to your people. There’s no need to have a huge library or bookstore. Pick five to ten titles and quote from them or mention them at some point in your announcements or preaching. By making the books visible on Sunday, you make a bold statement about what the church believes theologically, and you make a bold statement about the importance of reading for Christians.

### 9. Maintain a list of recommended books on your church website.
Especially if you don’t have the funds to maintain a church bookstore, maintain a recommended reading list on the church website or blog. Don’t load it with all the books you read in seminary. Keep the titles diverse, including theology and Christian living, even literature and poetry. Keep the list to the “best of the best” and be sure to freshen it with new titles as you discover them.

### 10. Empower your introverts.
You know who they are — the geeky nerdy men and women in your church that I remind you of. Most churches already have reclusive, introverted readers. You would be surprised what those introverts can do in leading a book discussion. Find them, help discover their gifting, empower them, and consider strategic ways to set them loose in the church.

Consider recommending a new book each month. Hold the book up, explain the value of the book in your own life, and preview how others will benefit from reading it. Ensure that copies are available when you make the announcement.

### 12. Recommend chapters of books.
Very often pastors will be asked for recommendations on a particular topic of the Christian life. Sometimes it’s more helpful to recommend chapters from a book rather than an entire book. With this practice, we can avoid intimidating nonreaders, and the chapter can be used surgically to address a very specific need in someone’s life. This is especially helpful when working with younger Christians who would be overwhelmed by an entire book on theology or Christian living. Consider each chapter you read as an individual tool for pastoral use.

### 13. Answer theological questions with pages from books.
Inevitably people in your church will raise theological questions. When they do, find the answers in theological books, photocopy the pages, highlight the relevant material, and give it to them to read. This act will model the relevance of reading, and it’s a small way to say to them that the important
questions in life are addressed in the pages of books. It reveals how relevant books are to real life.

14. **Give books as gifts.** For visitors, for members, for new parents, for whatever reason, find opportunities to gift books in your church. Set aside funds in the church budget for this. Books are meaningful gifts, they can serve a strategic function in the life of the reader, and they invite others in the church to experience the delights of reading.

**CONCLUSION**

Pastors, you men who love Christ, who treasure his word, and who diligently labor over the written word for the sake of your own souls, and for the soul-care of others — you men are counter-cultural readers. Few people in the world have more opportunities to positively influence the literacy of others.

- For the men here who labor diligently in the written word, I pray you are freshly encouraged to return to your church.
- For those pastors here who find reading to be a struggle, I pray that you would be encouraged to press on in this hard labor and discipline.
- In either case, I hope you also see that as a pastor, the greatest contribution you can make is to point to the supremacy of Christ in all things.
- For all of us, I pray we will jealously guard our literacy, careful to gauge the impact of our online reading and its detrimental impact on our offline reading patterns.
- That we would be careful of the passive, visual allurements that we engage in our lives.
- May we ever remain diligent to walk by faith in the invisible realities of God made available to us in this age by the written word.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS (20 MINUTES)**