

HOW TO READ A BOOK

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You might think the title of this article is a no-brainer. You think to yourself, “Everyone in the Reformed Churches of New Zealand can read a book.” And I respond, “That’s true. Almost everyone in our churches is literate and could read a book; but how many of us actually do read books? What was the last helpful, solid Christian book you read? And why do so few Christians read good Christian books?”

I am writing this article to give you some ideas, from my own experience and my own reading, on how to read a good book. There are many secular (non-Christian) books that are well worth reading. But the focus of this article is on encouraging and helping you to read useful *Christian* books.

Why don’t you read?

Some of us are not reading because we prefer to *listen* rather than read. You listen to one or two sermons every Sunday. You might listen to sermons and talks via the internet or as you are driving your car. This suits some of us very well because we are more audio learners than readers, and if this is you, then good on you for making use of these audio resources. However, there are some benefits to be gained by reading that are not available by listening. These include reading at your own pace, being able to stop and think about what you have read, the ability to re-read something you did not understand, and reading something aloud to another person for their interest or as a discussion point.

Others of us are not reading Christian books because you are doing most of your Christian reading and research on the internet. You may read Christian blogs, you receive a daily devotional, you read the links on facebook to Christian articles, or, if you have a question you want answered you google the information you require. I am not saying all this is wrong. There are many excellent Christian websites available and better to read these than not read at all. But the disadvantage of internet reading is that it is all in bits and pieces rather than following a sustained and developed argument. Rather than reading slowly and carefully you tend to scan and speed- read. We could compare it to eating. Most of us sit down and eat three substantial meals per day – breakfast, lunch and dinner – and we know this is a healthy pattern of eating. Others of us

eat like sheep and graze all through the day – eating snacks and taking a bite here and there, which is not as healthy! Internet reading is like grazing. You will still get fed but you miss out on the mental and spiritual benefits of reading a complete book that develops an argument and gives you a comprehensive presentation of a subject or topic.

Many Christians, however, especially males, find it difficult to read a full length book. Many men have told me they are not readers and some have informed me that they have never read an entire Christian book in their life! If this is you then you are doing well to have made it this far in this article. Here are a few suggestions for you on how to read a book.

Read with someone else

For many years now I have been reading books with other men. We both agree to read a particular book and agree to read a chapter each week, or usually each fortnight, and then we get together for an hour to discuss what we have read. The benefit of this system is that it motivates you to read because you are accountable to someone; you know you are going to get together and you know you need to have that chapter finished by that date, so you have to read! Getting together and discussing your reading helps you to understand and remember what you have read and then apply it to your own life and situation.

I have read many books like this and profited from them. This method has also encouraged these men to read and, in some cases, to read with someone else. Why not ask another man to be a reading partner?

A variation of this method is to set up a reading group, as Mrs Sally Davey has done in the Dovedale congregation for eleven years now. The group agrees to purchase and read a particular book and agrees on a certain date to meet together and discuss the entire book.¹ During the past two years the Pukekohe session has been reading through a couple of books. Each member of session is given a copy of the agreed on book and we read a chapter (or two) each month and then spend about half an hour at the beginning of our meeting discussing that chapter and applying it to our work in the church. In 2014 we read *The Shepherd Leader* by Timothy Witmer, and in 2015 we read *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons* by Thabite Anyabwile, both excellent books and most profitable for the work of the elders and deacons.

Read for a 20 minutes each day

John Piper, a well known Christian preacher and writer, describes one of the most helpful discoveries he made, which is “how much can be read in disciplined blocks of twenty minutes per day.... Suppose that you read slowly, say about 250 words per minute (as I do). This means that in 20 minutes you can read about 5000 words. An average book has about 400 words to a page. So you could read about 12.5 pages in 20 minutes. Suppose you discipline yourself to read a certain author or topic 20 minutes per day, 6 days per week, for a year. That would be 312 x 12.5 pages for a total of 3900 pages. Assume that an average book is 250 pages long. This means that you could read 15 books like that in one year.”ⁱⁱ

This method makes reading a book achievable because you are reading it in sections. All books are divided into chapters. A short chapter may be five pages and a long chapter may be 30 pages. But if you read it in short blocks you can get through a chapter, and, over time, you can read an entire book.

This pattern also makes it possible to read large books. At present I am reading through *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin, and am reading it with a young man in the Pukekohe Church who has a calling to be a pastor. I have read most of the *Institutes* before, and for a few years now have wanted to read it again. At first I was put off by the length; my Westminster edition is in two volumes and numbers 1500 pages! We have agreed to read a modest 25 pages a week and to get together regularly to discuss what we have read. At this pace we will read it in just over a year.

Maybe you are not a reader at all and you do not have the concentration to read for 20 minutes; then begin with five. Maybe you find your mind wanders; then read it aloud to yourself or to you wife. After a while you will find that you can read for 10 minutes, then for 15, and then for 20, and after that maybe even longer.

Mark what you read

I always mark my books with pen or pencil or a highlighter. I find this helps me concentrate on my reading and to pick out what I think are the important points. If I find something interesting that I want to locate later I write my own index on a blank page at the back of the book, noting down the subject and the page number. If you are reading a book along with someone else your

markings will help you when you get together to discuss your reading. As you read a book you may want to write little notes in the margins to summarise the main point. This helps you to think about what you are reading and to grasp the flow of the argument and the main ideas. (Do not do all this if you are borrowing the book!)

Avoid distractions

Earlier I suggested you read for 20 minutes a day. That is a reasonable and achievable goal, but only if you avoid the many other things that might distract you from this task.

The greatest distraction in our lives is the TV. My wife and I often go for a walk at night. As we walk past people's homes we notice that most people are watching TV. Recently I asked Harriet, "What did people do in the evening before the invention of the television?" We supposed that they kept working, or they talked, or played games, or they *read a book!* I urge you to turn off your TV and read a good Christian book. I am confident that the book will be far more edifying than any programme you might watch on TV.

Other distractions are email and texts. A survey of office workers showed that they check their email 30-40 times an hour. One in four people check their smartphone every 30 minutes, while one in five check it every ten minutes. Many people will interrupt a conversation or a task they are doing when a text or email comes through. When you decide to read a book I suggest you put your phone away or put it on silent so that you can have 20 minutes of uninterrupted concentration.

Another major distraction is facebook. Yes, it is interesting to keep up with what is going on in the lives of all your facebook "friends" and to see their photos and to know that this morning she baked some delicious scones, or that he crashed his mountain bike, or that the family pet rabbit died yesterday. But much of this is trivial information compared to what you can discover in a good book. Christian writers have noted that in the 21st century we know all about what has happened in the last 24 hours but practically nothing about what has happened in the last 2000 years. Our knowledge is wide and shallow rather than narrow and deep; we know a lot about many people and events but our knowledge is superficial. Reading Christian books will give depth to your knowledge.

Read favourite authors

As you begin reading you will find that you are drawn to certain authors more than others; you appreciate his style, or her insight into human nature, or his sound and wise advice. My favourite authors include (in alphabetical order) Os Guinness, Dr Martin Lloyd Jones, J I Packer, J C Ryle and John Stott.ⁱⁱⁱ If you find authors you enjoy reading look around for other books they have written. If you are not sure where to start ask your elder or your pastor for some advice.

Read the best book

There are thousands of worthwhile Christian books to read. If all you only did was read you would never be able to read all of them. It is possible to be so busy reading other books that you neglect the best book of all, which is the Bible. John Wesley said about the Bible, “O, give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here’s knowledge enough for me. Let me be a man of one book.”

We ought to be people of one book, the Bible. Yes, read other books about Christian doctrine, ethics and living; but these great books must not replace the best book of all, the Word of God.

I remember a Sunday School song that expresses this well:
“The best book to read is the Bible.
If you read it every day
It will help you on your way
The best book to read is the Bible.”
Read good Christian books; read them carefully and thoroughly; but do not neglect to read the best book of all.

J. A. Haverland - March 2016

ⁱ For a fuller description of this reading group see *Faith in Focus*, Volume 39/10 November 2012, p. 13-14

ⁱⁱ John Piper, *Brothers, we are not Professionals*, Christian Focus Publications, 2003, p. 66

ⁱⁱⁱ For further information on M Lloyd Jones and J C Ryle see articles on these two men by Leo de Vos and John Haverland in *Faith in Focus*, Volume 39/10 November 2012, p. 3-8