

Flex the Brain

By Gene Edward Veith

Reading books the right way will keep a mind in shape the way exercising keeps a body in shape

Christianity depends on reading. Therefore, Christians have to read.

These are overstatements—obviously, many illiterate persons over the centuries have had faith—but they emphasize that God has chosen to communicate Himself to us by handing us a Book. Christian spirituality is grounded not in having visions, not in hearing voices inside our heads, not in cultivating mystical experiences, but in receiving the Word of God. That is, by reading.

What we know of God—and of ourselves and where we stand before God—we learn by what He tells us about Himself, and He reveals Himself to us most clearly by means of human language that has been written down. This Word can then be studied, contemplated, and applied, and when the Word is preached and proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work, creating repentance and faith in Christ.

The word bible simply means "book," and in the Holy Bible, God speaks not just about history, theology, and objective information. He also speaks to its reader and hearer personally, to the heart and the soul. Every genre of literature is contained in the Holy Book, from gripping narratives to passionate poetry, from mind-teasing parables to personal letters. A personal relationship to God, like human relationships, is built on the medium of language, of two people communicating with each other. The Christian speaks to God in prayer; God speaks back by means of His Word.

So Christians dare not despise reading. In fact, where Christianity has gone, literacy has always followed. The Old Testament scribes and the reading of the books of Moses as a rite of passage for young Hebrews led to Christian academies and the invention of the universities. The very goal of universal literacy grew out of the Reformation and its emphasis on the Bible.

When the Reformation made the Bible once again central, churches opened schools to teach people how to read it. And once they could read the Bible, they could read anything. As the newly invented printing press churned out Bibles and theological texts, newly educated millions read them voraciously and also books of other kinds. With access to knowledge and information, the medieval class system started to crumble and social mobility shot up, as commoners started their own businesses and in some cases became wealthier than their feudal masters.

Literate people soon became able to take part in their own government. Political liberty, self-government, and democratic republics became more common. They would be impossible if it were not for books, pamphlets, periodicals, and newspapers, and people who could and would read them in order to become informed, to thrash out ideas, and to make intelligent decisions.

Arthur W. Hunt, in his new book *The Vanishing Word*, shows how Christianity and the written word have prospered together. He also shows what happens when the habit of reading is lost and people orient themselves instead to sensate images. Reading encourages thinking, reflecting, and the cultivation of truth, but image cultures tend to be driven by subjectivism, superstition, hedonism, and propaganda.

The great media critic Neil Postman—who died last month—pointed out the ways that reading encourages certain habits of mind. Reading teaches us to think in a logically connected way. It cultivates a sustained attention span. It conditions us to think in terms of abstract ideas, objective truth, and sustained reflection. But television and other media that depend on images condition us to subjectivism. TV cultivates a short attention span and a purely emotional response. It increases the demand for constant, entertaining stimulation and undercuts the capacity for delayed gratification.

Today we have become a nation of channel surfers, and we are paying the price in political apathy, moral indifference, and the mad pursuit of sensation. Even our books are often reduced to the entertainment formulas of the pop culture. The old problem was illiteracy, that many people could not read. Today, although illiteracy remains even in products of our school system, the bigger problem is aliteracy, that many people can read but never do.

Imagination as a human capacity is extraordinarily important, and greatly neglected. Imagination is not some mystified "creativity" that is the sole province of artsy types. If you can picture the tree in your back yard or recall the new car smell or visualize the finished product while you are still working on it, you have imagination. But those who merely consume visual images by sitting passively in front of a TV screen are absorbing the products of someone else's imagination. Those who created the TV shows are indeed using their imaginations, just as they are writing and reading, but the viewer's mind is not left with much to do. Read a novel, though, and your mind, as led by the storyteller, is doing the imagining.

So reading remains indispensable. Even television scripts have to be first written and then read. For the ancient Canaanites, the ability to read was reserved for the priesthood, whose monopoly on knowledge gave them power. The biblical legacy is that everyone should read, with power dispersed. Many people today care less about this power and therefore lose it—but leaders and culture-makers continue to read. Christians too, as "people of the Book," continue to read. This means that thoughtful, reading Christians can also be leaders and culture-makers, especially if their non-Christian peers just watch television.

How to Read

Reading can train the mind and train the imagination, but it matters how we read and what we read. When we read, we are literally tapping into someone else's mind. What the writer was thinking is now playing back in our brains. Here are some suggestions about how to read thoughtfully and with discernment, in a way that will build up your mind as lifting weights builds up your muscles.

To begin with, you can't get the most from reading if you turn the printed page into just another television screen. Readers should not read passively, as our current media culture conditions us to do. Active reading—staying in charge of the process, interacting with the author, thinking about what is being said, critically evaluating what is going on, contemplating what it all means, and sorting out the good from the bad—is vital.

What matters in a book is not just its content but its meaning and its effect. Just because there is violence in a book does not mean that it is immoral. Every plot must emerge out of a conflict, so there cannot be any story without problems or obstacles or that externalized conflict that is violence. The question to ask is, what does the violence mean? More importantly, what is the effect of the violence on me?

Some depictions of violence are presented so as to evoke compassion, a very moral feeling. This is the effect of much of the violence in, for example, that ultimate war story *The Iliad*.

But some books, especially those written today, depict violence in a way that appeals to our darkest nature, dredging up perverse and twisted impulses of sadism and masochism. So here's a vital question: Is the violence depicted in such a way that it makes you want to commit violence against someone else, or makes you want to protect them?

A work that deals with sex may do so innocently, yet with understanding and insight and with a moral effect. The King Arthur saga deals with adultery, but in such a way that the reader learns and imagines how it wrecks lives, ruins relationships, perverts love, and destroys civilizations. The love story between Lancelot and Guinevere may be touching, but it ends in overwhelming tragedy, and the reader who pushes on to the end is unlikely to want to commit adultery as they did.

In many of today's romantic novels, on the contrary, adultery can be made to seem attractive, glamorous, fulfilling. An undiscerning, passive, unthinking reader might well become conditioned to think that adultery is thrilling and even good—and that makes him more likely to jump on the temptation should it arise in real life.

Virtual sin is still sin. Christ warns us that the adultery we commit in our hearts is sinful, even if we never carry it out, and that cultivating murderous thoughts is likewise soul-destroying (Matthew 5:21-30). Not just pornographic novels but pornographic descriptions in legitimate novels can ignite mental adulteries. Reading can be an occasion for other sins as well, causing us to wallow in rebellion or self-righteousness or hate or despair. If it is better, as Jesus says in that passage, to pluck out our eyes than succumb to sin, readers who find themselves moved in sinful directions should learn at least to close the book.

Readers must also attend to what the book means, its themes and symbolism and its point. The original 19th-century *Dracula* by Bram Stoker depicts demonic evil that can be overcome by Christian faith. The Victorian vampire is terrified of the cross, the Bible, and the sacraments. As we go from the era of Victorian Christianity to our own era of nihilism, the same subject is treated far differently. Anne Rice's vampires bat away crucifixes and are unfazed by Christianity. Stoker presents his horror tale from the point of view of the victims and the good guys. Ms. Rice presents hers from the point of view of the vampires, so that readers can enjoy the vicarious experience of drinking a victim's blood.

Both have the same subject and the same genre; both give the essentially innocent sensation of scaring the reader; but they have very different meanings and moral effects. Not that simply reading vampire stories necessarily is sinful. I clearly have sampled them, but my reaction was to be repelled, not to be tempted, much less drawn into their sadistic occultism. I did find them instructive, though, about what has changed from the Victorian era to today, gaining a glimpse into the spiritual condition of the many today who have no inkling of heaven but yearn for hell.

While it is generally good to read, we should watch ourselves as we read. We should be critical readers, able to look objectively and with moral and theological evaluation both on what we read and on ourselves.

Reading with Worldviews in Mind

Readers should pay attention to worldviews for two reasons: to understand the material itself and to develop a Christian response.

The worldview of the author opens up the work's context, background, and its place in history, all of which are essential for a full understanding. In reading Homer, for example, recognizing the immorality of the gods, the pervading sense of doom, and the idealism that leads to tragedy—all of which are elements of the pagan worldview that Homer knew—helps us sympathize with the struggles of Achilles and Hector. Attending to the worldview issues in Homer shows us too just why the gospel when it would come to the Greeks some centuries later would be seen as such "good news."

The historical sequence of worldviews gives a framework for understanding more deeply the works we read. We can see the influence of the Christian assumptions about the world in tales from the Middle Ages, even as they are sometimes in conflict with an undercurrent of paganism. We can see the influence of the Bible in the age of the Reformation, though again there is often conflict with the countercurrent of humanism. Then came the Age of Reason, followed by the Age of Romanticism. Then came Darwin and naturalism, followed by the despair of existentialism and all of the 20th-century alternatives, from Marxism to Ayn Rand's objectivism. Now we have postmodernism, denying that there is any objective truth at all, with writers and scholars and politicians trying to create their own realities.

Worldview criticism—the recognition and analysis of different worldviews and the study of how they manifest themselves in literature, the arts, and culture—is a field in which evangelical Christians have done excellent pioneering work. Nancy Pearcey, James Sire, and Francis Schaeffer have written helpful guides to worldview

thinking. Christian books on various disciplines, professors at Christian colleges, and WORLD employ worldview critiques. Conversely, they also show what a biblical worldview entails.

Christians have a specific understanding about life, the world, and everything in it. The biblical worldview affirms the Creation and the Fall, the greatness and yet sinfulness of humanity, the objectivity of moral truth, and the reality of a transcendent God who became incarnate, who died and rose to win forgiveness and eternal life for sinners. Grasping and exploring the rich, multifaceted implications of the Christian worldview are a matter of reading the Bible and the works of Christian writers—theologians, poets, novelists, political theorists, scientists, scholars, journalists—from the days of the early church to those writing now.

Reading with worldviews in mind does not mean, however, just reading Christian authors or recognizing what in one's reading to reject. A Christian worldview liberates readers and shows them how to draw on a wide range of insights, even those of non-Christians, while avoiding their errors. There is a sense in which Christians can be better readers than those who are not.

Christians understand that the Bible is true and its Author is also the Author of everything that exists. That means the worldview the Bible sets forth is comprehensive, whole, and bigger than all of the narrow alternatives conceived by the whole array of fallen human minds. For example, what is man? The gloriously empowered measure of all things, as the humanists affirm, or a brutal, violent animal driven by base instincts as the naturalists say? The Christian view, in contrast, affirms a bigger, more complex truth: Human beings were created to bear God's image, and yet have fallen into a condition of utter sinfulness.

Christians can therefore agree with part of what the humanists say and can recognize the greatness of human accomplishments, seeing them in terms of remnants of the Divine Image. Christians can also agree with part of what the naturalists say and can acknowledge brutish and debased vileness, all of which is simply more evidence of our radical fall into sin. Although humanists and naturalists contradict each other and cannot both be right, Christians, who possess the big picture that limited human ideologies see only in part, can accept insights from both parties while remaining critical of them both.

A Christian can read a nature poem by an author from the Romantic movement and think, yes, nature is indeed beautiful, and this poem helps me to notice just how beautiful it is. The Christian can also note that the poet is a pantheist who worships nature as a god, and can point out the wrongness of that view: Nature is beautiful because the true God made it so. The Christian reader can thank the poet for the glimpse of truth, without having to buy into the philosophy of the poet, who, tragically, lacks the basis for his own insight.

Thus, Christians can profit from books written in the Age of Reason (we believe in reason) and the Age of Emotion (we believe in emotion). We can read books on science and the orderliness of creation (we believe in order) and books bewailing the disorder of life (we believe there is disorder). We can read expressions of despair (believing that for a life without God there is nothing but despair) and expressions of hope (believing in the hope that awaits us in heaven).

As the great 20th-century Christian poet T.S. Eliot has shown, the split between reason and emotion is a symptom of the breakup of the Christian consensus. Each new ideology seizes upon some fragment of the Christian worldview, trying to turn it into an all-explaining self-sufficient theory. Each new ideology subsequently fails, so someone seizes upon some other fragment.

Humanly devised worldviews are small, partial, reducing the complexities of life into a simplistic answer. They are narrow-minded. The Christian worldview, in contrast, is whole, vast, sophisticated.

Reading through the lens of a Christian worldview makes possible drawing on nearly the whole range of written expression. There is a reason why the partial worldviews arose as they did, usually reacting against the errors of what came before. The Age of Reason did need the corrective of the Age of Emotion. For wholeness, those who are too rational need to develop their inner lives, while those who are too subjective need to become more rational. Christians need not set these categories apart from each other, as secularists have to.

Since truth exists beyond ourselves and is grounded in the will and the work of God, Christians can affirm truth wherever we find it. We can build on what is of value in whatever we read. But this is only possible if we read with skepticism, refusing to accept human ideologies as authoritative, recognizing just how incomplete they are, and supplementing what they say with the larger truths found in Scripture.

What to Read

So what should we read? There are different purposes for reading: We can read for information that pertains to our work. We can seek out knowledge about something we need or simply to satisfy our curiosity. We can read simply to occupy our time. Sir Philip Sydney, an important Christian literary theorist, said that good books both instruct and delight. While this can be two different functions from two different sorts of books, Sir Philip observed that the greatest effect is when the two are going on at the same time, instructing while delighting, and delighting while instructing.

If the larger purpose of reading is to exercise our minds and our imaginations—and, further, to develop a distinctly Christian mind and imagination—some books are more helpful than others. Good books will be more helpful than bad or mediocre books. How do we tell which is which? Philippians 4:8 enjoins us to dwell on things that are "excellent," "worthy of praise," "lovely," and "of good report." Those qualities would imply that objective aesthetic standards exist.

Our current media culture would have us react only in terms of instant gratification, judging a book solely by its entertainment value, the hedonistic pleasure sensations it sparks. We are to think less of a book if it is demanding or if it asks us to think about what we have read. This is how many Christians react, not realizing that this is how we have been conditioned by the non-Christian world.

A book of "good report" would be one recognized by others as worthwhile. Finding knowledgeable and trustworthy critics can be a good way to identify books worth reading. Works that are "excellent" often demand hard work on the part of the reader and tend to be impossible to read passively. "Lovely" points to a work of beauty, to objective qualities that make it really well done and "worthy of praise."

Philippians 4 does not say to read only Christian works. If we are honest, we must admit that some Christian works are not "excellent" or "worthy of praise" or "lovely" or "of good report." Many non-Christian writers are good to read because they unwittingly follow God's aesthetic laws of craftsmanship and because they are honest. Hemingway was no Christian, but when in "Hills Like White Elephants" he imagines a man and woman discussing whether she should get an abortion, he nails the issues—the man's attempt to manipulate and use the woman; her reluctance, her yielding to the pressure, and her guilt—in a way that corresponds to God's moral truth.

The highest quality books stand up to—and often require—more than one reading. I have read Hamlet probably hundreds of times, in the course of my teaching vocation, and, even though I know how it ends, I never tire of it, and I keep finding more and more insights every time I read it. A useful test of good writing is the test of time. If people still find a book compelling, after all of these years, it must have something that is universal, transcending time and place. Time winnows out books of transitory value, and there is a reason why the best tend to last.

C.S. Lewis in his classic essay "On the Reading of Old Books" recommends reading at least one old book for every three new books. This is not because old books are necessarily superior but because every age has its blind spots: "We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books." To break out of the narrowness of our own time, in which it is assumed that the way people today think is the only way that is possible, we must enter the thought-forms of other ages. These, of course, have errors and narrowness of their own, to which we are less likely to succumb. But in order to transcend the limits of our own day, we must "keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books."

John Milton—the Puritan, the revolutionary, and arguably the second greatest poet in the English language after Shakespeare—cited "the benefit which may be had of books promiscuously read." He was advocating not promiscuity in the sexual sense but reading widely and broadly, in many fields, with many genres, and on many topics. Today, this means browsing in bookstores and libraries, picking up a book here and there, reading a magazine article that looks interesting, dabbling in the whole range of what has been written. Instead of specializing in one narrow area—such as only reading romance novels or only reading theology—it entails reading lots of different works on lots of different topics.

At the present moment, I am reading a weird postmodern novel about Dante, a book about the history of the U.S. Navy, a bestselling historical novel about how alchemy gave way to modern science, a dual biography of Napoleon and Wellington, a book of 17th-century devotions, the letters of the anti-Nazi and anti-liberal German theologian Hermann Sasse, and the latest Tom Clancy techno-thriller.

This does not count what I read in my calling as an English professor (literary classics; literary criticism) or as a writer for *WORLD* (various newspapers and periodicals, cultural analysis, trends of the pop culture). I read for knowledge and I read for pleasure. I let my inclinations be my guide, but I find myself led into some fascinating corners of thought, of history, and of biblical reality that I would never have known about if I did not read promiscuously.

It is not necessary, however, to read everything or to read everything with the same intensity. To draw on yet another insight from the past preserved in a book, that of Sir Francis Bacon in his essay "Of Studies": "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

The Library Card

One of the best governmental institutions is the public library. Libraries are repositories of the accumulated knowledge and achievements of civilizations. With the way the little local library on the street corner is now electronically connected to virtually all the libraries of the world, we can have access to any book we want. Children who are readers can learn whatever they need to learn. Adults who have not had the benefit of a university education can educate themselves by reading. Poverty need be no obstacle. Library cards are free.

Some say the age of the book is over. With the Internet, many people think, we will not need them anymore. But even what gets posted on the Web must be read. The Internet has actually made books even more widely available than before. It is no accident that the most-used commercial site on the Internet is Amazon.com, which enables a reader in the most isolated backwater to buy practically any book.

And though the publishing industry keeps complaining and has many woes, megastores like Borders and Barnes & Noble are selling vast numbers of books. Even people with more than a hundred cable channels are reading. The visual media culture's constant bombardment of visual stimulation creates, ironically, boredom. It is harder to be bored with a good book, and it may be that many of the casualties of our sensory overload may turn back to reading.

And if the culture does turn finally against reading, if with the collapse of our education system and the coming new idolatry we return to a preliterate tribal state, a few people, at least, will still read. Cultures have to have thinkers, which means readers, even if this means reverting to the model of other pagan societies, in which reading was reserved for an elite priesthood.

But Christians, whether marginalized and persecuted or the only ones in a position to exercise creativity and leadership, will keep reading, even if no one else does. Christians must always be people of the Book.