

The Books, Especially the Parchments¹

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In 2 Timothy 4:13 Apostle Paul said

Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments (NKJV).

We live in a time where the servant of God is confronted with an intellectual and practical problem concerning ministry and the depth of study required to serve Christ effectively in this world.

There was a time in the church where the study—the physical office of the servant of God—was a holy place from where the ministry of the Word was crafted and went forth. The study was that place where the literary life of the servant of God was made manifest. There was a time when the study was a place of rare tomes, first editions, ephemera, leather-bound delights, gazetteers, prints and busts, and general curiosities. Under a green library lamp or the amber glow of a leaded glass light, the servant of God used his time to drink deeply from the Word of God and other volumes reflective of his craft and trade. From there, the work of ministry was done.

The “study” as a noun occupies the eighth usage in the *Oxford English Dictionary’s* definition of the word “study.” Four columns into the definition of the word whose verb form came to us in the fourth century from the Latin *studium*, we have the noun study: “A room in a house or other building furnished with books, and used for private study, reading, writing, or the like.” The first use of “study” in this sense appearing in the English language in 1303, in Robert Manning Brunne’s poem *Handling Synne*: “In his chamber, beside his study...” The metered verse would go on, without knowing that a noun—the word, “study”—was birthed. The study in this context and sense has become rather obscure outside of academic, legal, or ecclesiastical circles.

However, even in the ecclesiastical realm, the study has fallen on difficult times. Why is this? It is because the literary life of the servant of God has fallen on difficult times. The servant of God has been guilting out of his study that he might go forth, be busy, and be practical. Event has become ministry.

The servant of God ministers in the age of dings and likes and clicks. We minister in an age of memes, shorts, and abbreviated abilities to think and to process words, thoughts, and ideas. Our obsession with event has led us to elevate the practical over the theoretical; the ephemeral for that which is everlasting. Many servants of God have moved away from systematics and the intellectual arts required for our craft and exchanged them for the pragmatic. The question of ‘what does it mean?’ has been exchanged for ‘what should I do?’

¹ This essay is based on Dr. Eshelman’s 2022 Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary commencement address.

Being practical is seen as a way to connect and love people. Depth of theological knowledge and time in the study are often juxtaposed with loving people. This false dichotomy between loving people and loving the study is unbiblical and leads to false conclusions. If the servant of God does not love people, he is not a Christian. If he does not love the study, he is not reformed.

As the servants of God, our work is a work of words, and that work requires both *logos* (word) and *poiema* (action). Francis Turretin wrote, “A theoretical system is that which is occupied in contemplation alone and has no other object than knowledge.”² The minister has an object greater than knowledge.

The theoretical and practical abide together with one purpose: to bring glory to God—and that means that the servant of God will be a man of letters and a man who swims deeply in the waters of words and meaning. An early 20th-century professor and literary critic once wrote:

A work of literary art can be considered in two lights—it both means and is. It is both *logos* (something said) and *poiema* (something made). As *logos* it tells a story, or expresses an emotion, or exhorts or pleads or describes or rebukes... As *poiema*, by its aural beauties and also by the balance and contrast and the unified multiplicity of successive parts, it is an object of art, a thing shaped so as to give great satisfaction.³

The servant of God is called into the narrative of God’s redemptive work and is called participant into the aural beauties of applying that *logos* to the lives of those who are served. The minister’s work is a work of words. Reclaim the study and the literary life of the servant of God. Os Guinness noted,

The world of sight, the world of the eye, cannot take us beyond what is shown. Because sight can only go so far, it takes words and thought to give the real truth and meaning behind what is seen.⁴

The calling as servants of God is to master words, to love them deeply, and to bring the God who speaks into the lives of the very people He has called you to love with those words. From your study will come the wisdom of God.

Context

The Apostle Paul serves, as one referred to him, as the archetypal servant-scholar that demonstrated this call to the literary life of the servant of God: “Paul’s request reveals he is a man of letters devoted to the Scriptures, who, if at all possible, wanted to have his writings and his writing materials close at hand... Paul is the archetypal scholar.”⁵

The text under consideration says, “Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments.” In this request from the quill of the Apostle, we do not find Paul in the academy as he petitions for his books and parchments; he is in prison. Paul

² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 1:21.

³ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 132.

⁴ Os Guinness, “The Word in an Age of Image” in *The Anglican Evangelical Crisis*, ed. Melvin Tinker (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2001), 161.

⁵ Philip H. Towner, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 630.

has been imprisoned for the sake of the Gospel. From this dark Roman cell, the Apostle awaits an untimely death, and from there his request goes forward. From Carpus he requests that which was left in Troas, “τὸν φαιλόνην...καὶ τὰ βιβλία μάλιστα τὰς μεμβράνας”: a cloak, his books (or scrolls), and his parchments. John Calvin said,

Although death was coming close, Paul was still keen to learn, so that he might be better able to teach others... Paul still desires to use his time profitably, even though he has one foot in the grave.⁶

As the archetypal Christian scholar, Paul demonstrates the importance of a literary life among the servants of God: “Bring my books and my parchments.” The Apostle understood the importance of growing in literary excellence as he ministered, even as he approached the grave. His instrument continued to be refined as he served the body of Christ with words and with his craft as a minister of the gospel. This required a literary life.

“The more any instrument is refined and perfected for some particular function, the fewer those who have the skill, or the occasion, to handle it must of course become. Many use ordinary knives, and few use surgeons’ scalpels,” said C. S. Lewis.⁷

Today you are called to not put those tools aside but *tolle lege*—to pick up and read. As you go into the fields of harvest that are ripe, your tools are not combines or cultivators, but the scrolls and the parchments which the Apostle here requests.

As one with a literary life, the servant of God will increasingly stand out in a culture made numb and deafened by dings and likes and shares. Your literary life will demonstrate, as it did to the ancient world’s ministers and servants of God, that you are alive and not dead. The God who speaks and writes does so through the power of words and through his servants in submission to those words.

Speaking of the decline of literacy in American culture, Gene Edward Veith wrote of the literary man:

Even if the masses sink into illiteracy and drug themselves by amusement, the influential and the powerful will still be readers, as they are today. In the ancient pagan worlds, reading was a zealously guarded secret for the priests and the ruling elite...⁸

The difference for the Christian is that the literary life is not held in secret but is to be shared in service as the ministry of the church. In 1645, as the Westminster Assembly’s *Directory of Publick Worship* was approved, the literary life was to be proportioned liberally among the masses. The *Directory* says,

Beside publick reading of the holy scriptures, every person that can read, is to be exhorted to read the scriptures privately, (and all others that cannot read, if not disabled by age, or otherwise, are likewise to be exhorted to learn to read,) and to have a Bible.

⁶ John Calvin, *Sermons on Second Timothy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2019) 429.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 97.

⁸ Gene Edward Veith, *Reading Between the Lines* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), chap. 1.

The servant of God is a literary man: a man of books and scrolls and parchments, a man of the study—that early 14th-century noun describing the place from which your labors occur.

Books

“Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments.”

There is something curious as to the nature of the books and parchments that the Apostle Paul requested. Philip Towner of the American Bible Society in New York City said that “a surprising amount of research and speculation” has gone into this text.⁹

The books or scrolls of the Apostle’s may be less of a mystery than the parchments. Patrick Fairbairn said, “What respectively might be their nature and contents cannot be known, further than that, being urgently sought at such a moment, they must have related to things of the highest interest...”¹⁰

The Greek word βιβλίον “designates a written work in the form of either a scroll or a codex made from papyrus...”¹¹ We know that the Apostle was familiar with the poets and the Greek writers of his day. It has been a part of the Christian tradition to read widely and to interact with the cultural and literary milieu of the day. This practice has been especially true of the sons of the reformation—those called to serve God in the reformed tradition. The preacher in Ecclesiastes said, “Of the making of books there is no end” (Ecc. 12:12). Elsewhere the Apostle Paul said, “Give attention to reading” (1 Tim. 4:13).

Despite the mystery of titles and authors, the nature of these books and scrolls were compositions meant to instruct, edify, challenge, and defend. You, as the servant of God, must follow this pattern and learn to swim deeply in the waters of literary life.

The Familiar and the Known

The first articulation of the servant’s literary life is to be in reading the familiar and the known. There will be times in your ministry where you are perplexed as to how to move ahead in an area of praxis—of *poiema*. The familiar and the known will assist in your ministry. As the Apostle (Paul) says in Hebrews 11:4, “though they are dead, they still speak.” Invitations to sit at the feet of John Calvin and the Puritans and the likes of C. H. Spurgeon and J. C. Ryle ought to be familiar and known in your ministry. The Westminster Standards and the men seated at the Assembly ought to have a voice in your service to the church.

Know to whom you can turn for the counsel, encouragement, and instruction needed at a given time. C. S. Lewis, reflecting on the drawings of Beatrix Potter, said, “It now stares me in the face that in some of Beatrix Potter’s plates you find witty drawings of pure color, while others are ugly, ill-composed, and even perfunctory.”¹² Not all of the familiar and the known are perfect, but much is excellent. Go to the colorful and beautiful. Go to Calvin for soteriology. Ryle is a trusted friend in Christian living. The Puritans put forth excellency in so many matters.

⁹ Towner, *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 627.

¹⁰ Patrick Fairbairn, *Geneva Series of Commentaries: I and II Timothy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2002) 397.

¹¹ Towner, *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 629.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 14.

Read above your abilities—read John Owen and have your mind stretched toward God and the things of God. Read at your level as your ordinary service in the Christian life. Read below your level for the desserts of the mind and for mental stimulation. The familiar and the known ought to line the walls of your study and permeate from your soul as you minister.

If your reaction to this is that you are leaving seminary, and your days of Calvin and Bavinck and Gillespie and Turretin are now behind you, I would remind you of what was once written of the unliterary man: “The sure mark of an unliterary man is that he considers ‘I’ve read it already’ to be a conclusive argument against reading a work.”¹³ Eschew such foolishness. Welcome these men and their words into your study.

Friends & Loved Ones

Besides the familiar and the known, friends and loved ones are to speak to you as well. Your study should include Augustine and Bernard and at times Thomas, who are friends that ought to be heard. Loved ones can include the living who are currently on the front lines of the church militant—men such as Carl Trueman, Joel Beeke, and Sinclair Ferguson. Men such as these have proven their friendship to God and the fact that they are churchmen worthy of your time. Bring in their books, especially the ones that will prove to be timeless. The servant of God has books in his study that were written by friends that have not aged well. Choose your friends and loved ones wisely. Be discerning, as you are unable to read everything that will come across your desk.

Foes & Critics

Concerning discernment, the servant of God must also read foes and critics. Basil the Great, teaching his students of the correct use of Greek literature, said, “The soul must be guarded with great care, lest through our love for letters it receive some contamination unawares, as men drink in poison with honey.”¹⁴

The servant of God will be required to contend with enemies. Consider how many of the New Testament’s lines are given to enemies of the cross. Simon the Sorcerer, Alexander the Coppersmith, Diotrophes, and the like—all were men who were enemies of the cross, tfoes and critics of the New Testament Church. A servant must contend—*you* must contend—earnestly for the sake of the gospel and the glory of Christ. In your contending, you must be as wise as a serpent, as Jesus instructed His disciples. You will contend within your study with the new atheists; those that promote evolution and false ideologies of human origin. You will read from those who promote unbiblical views of justification, or ungodly views on human sexuality. False ideas abound. The servant of God must contend—and do it with wisdom. Yet make sure that a majority of your reading is from the familiar and from friends, rather than foes.

Fiction & the Beautiful

The last category of books that I would like to commend to the servant of God is fiction and the beautiful. So many of the servants of God have grown crooked due to an imbalanced life of reading and study. If the earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, then your study ought to include writings that will stretch your mind, your view of the creation around you, and even your ability

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 2.

¹⁴ Frederick Morgan Padelford, “Essays on the Study and Use of Poetry by Plutarch and Basil the Great” in *Yale Studies in English* (Yale: Yale Press, 1902), 99.

to use words, ideas, and thoughts unto the glory of God. Quality fiction will teach you to use the cadence and engagement of rhythm required in a mastery of language.

C. S. Lewis once wrote, “An amazing knowledge of Chaucerian or Shakespearian criticism sometimes co-exists with a very inadequate knowledge of Chaucer or Shakespeare...”¹⁵ The servant ought to read, not merely to criticize what is wrong, but to be stretched to use words and literary images as a part of his ministerial craft. In a recent article on preaching, it was said that “No amount of seminary training, theological study, or cultural awareness can completely mitigate the anxieties of preaching. Like the poet, we are tasked to rely on more than we alone possess. Our words often fall short, we never know enough, and our skill is constantly in competition with the changing tastes of the age.”¹⁶

Quality fiction and beautiful literature will assist in your craft when used properly. John Steinbeck, John Updike, Mark Twain, and Wendell Berry have helped sermons and writing to be calligraphic in a cacophonous world. Choose wisely and read that which is fiction, beautiful, and fantastic. We are not Fundamentalists; we are Reformed. Illustrations and references to the classics, poetry, and quality literature will be welcomed from pen and pulpit more readily than reflections on memes and clickbait. Balance these things aright in your literary life as the servant of God.

Parchments

But now, I want to draw your attention back to the text at hand. The Apostle Paul said to “bring the books and the parchments.” In the experience of the church, there are servants of God whose literary life is not properly built on the foundation of the Scriptures. *μάλιστα τὰς μεμβράνας*. The parchments are the Scriptures, that which was written on more lasting material, that which is set apart from the mere scrolls. The parchments requested are the Scriptures. God’s Word must be known above all things by the servant of God. Commenting on his literature students, C. S. Lewis, teaching medieval and Renaissance English at the University of Cambridge, said:

The best safeguard against bad literature is a full experience of good... boys know what is expected of them. They know, on quite other grounds, that Shakespeare has to be praised and Shelley condemned. They get the right answer not because their methods lead to it, but because they knew it beforehand.¹⁷

Methods must be known—the Scriptural system must be used by the servant to interpret properly. And how many of the servants of God know the right answer—they know to affirm Westminster and to commend Calvin—but not because their methods led to it? How often will this lead to falling away?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word “especially” in the text means “particular, specific as opposed to general.” It also means “pre-eminent, exceptionally distinguished. Chiefly of feelings, qualities, or attributes: exceptional in degree.”

¹⁵ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 128-129.

¹⁶ Ryan Diaz, *Wendell Berry Taught Me to Preach*, Christianity Today, May 2022.

¹⁷ C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 94.

This is the very word of God. As you commence from this place into the various ministries to which the LORD has called you, allow the word of God, *μάλιστα τὰς μεμβράνας*, to permeate your service. Charles Spurgeon once said,

At their very best, all other books are but as gold leaf, requiring acres to find one ounce of the precious metal. But the Bible is solid gold. It contains blocks of gold, mines, and whole caverns of priceless treasure. In the mental wealth of the wisest men there are no jewels like the truth of revelation... Let it be to you and to me a settled matter that the word of the Lord shall be honored in our minds and enshrined in our hearts.¹⁸

The Word of God must be the very centerpiece of your study—the solid gold and priceless treasure of your literary life.

Conclusion

It has been said that:

In a world so easily satisfied with images, it's too easy to waste our lives ... squandering our free time away with entertainment. We have a higher calling. God has called us to live our lives by faith and not by sight—and this can mean nothing less than committing our lives to the pursuit of language, revelation, and great books.¹⁹

This reviving of the servant of God's study and the literary life that is reflective of a servant of God will set you apart from a culture that has fallen to the idols of self-gratification and screen addiction—a culture of literary death. The servant of God will regain comprehension. He will regain thinking. He will regain true wisdom and delight.

Safeguard your literary life. Revive the study as the sacred place from which ministry goes forth. John Calvin said, "Whenever we seek to be good and effective teachers we must begin by being good students—and not only begin, but continue to be diligent all the days of our lives."²⁰ To this end, the Apostle wrote, "Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come—and the books, especially the parchments."

¹⁸ C. H. Spurgeon, *Sermons*, Metropolitan Tabernacle, 27.124

¹⁹ Tony Reinke, *Lit! A Christian Guide to Reading Books* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 50.

²⁰ Calvin, *Sermons on 2 Timothy*, 430.