

# The Mystery of the Sea



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I remember the Senior Class Dinner at Princeton Seminary the year I graduated. The speaker was George Buttrick, who at that time was pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He challenged our class, as future pastors, in two directions:

First, he urged us to be *with* our people, to be listeners in the market place in order to understand *where* people are and *what* they are thinking and feeling.

His second word of counsel seemed to contradict the first: "When you are at Coney Island, don't tell the people of the concessions on the boardwalk, about which they know, tell them of the mystery of the sea, about which they do not know." He went on: "Don't read only what your people are reading . . . read what your people are not reading."

In the space of this article I want to reflect upon some of the ways to follow such advice. I myself am trying to do so, and three questions have come forward as a practical result of that attempt: (1) How is it possible to find time to read about the mystery of the sea when I have so many urgent responsibilities among the concessions? (2) When I have found the time, then the problem is: What should I read as a pastor in today's world? (3) How do I remember what I read? In this article I will be mostly autobiographical, reflecting upon some of my own experiences with these three questions.

Most pastors have been given what I call the *gift of time*; that is, the privilege of organizing time with more flexibility than any other profession that I am aware of. As each of us knows, however, this gift of time has its own snares to those who are not selfstarters, or who allow the hours of the week to confuse themselves into a random jumble of low quality segments. This means that the first challenge which confronts the pastor who wants to study and read seriously is to have a clear philosophy of the week. I have found that for my own life the key to having quality time for my family, for spiritual formation, for reading, for ministry to people, for writing, and for recreation is to have a rhythm in my life. This means that in my thinking about time I primarily think in terms of a week rather than in terms of the year, month, or day. It is no mistake, it seems to me, that the seven-day week is the biblical yardstick for life measurement in the Ten Commandments. My goal is to divide each week into a rhythm of work, rest, worship, play: of work with people — work alone; of worship with community of faith — worship alone; of discussion — of reflection. A person is able to take in stride high intensity demands if there is also built into life the opportunity for an easing up of demand. I am able to enjoy rest if time allotted to rest follows real work. I am talking

about a rhythm that includes fast/slow, many/few, rich/lean, exterior/interior.

I divide my own week into two major parts: I place into the first part Sunday morning through Wednesday evening, the large group meetings and worship services, also the counseling, small study group meetings and teaching sessions, and finally the church administration and staff obligations that fall to me. Thursday and Friday are days for private study, reflection, writing, and reading. Friday evening through Saturday evening is family recreation time — a time for total change of pace. My study goal each week is to have completed by Thursday noon the sermon for the coming Sunday. When this target is achieved, it then means that Thursday afternoon and Friday are available for long-term study, reading, and writing objectives. I find that if the immediate teaching-preaching preparation is not completed by Thursday, then that unfinished task tends to threaten and intimidate Friday and Saturday. My week is more intense at the beginning, and it eases up toward the end. The time at both sides of the week are of a better quality, it seems to me, when there is such a rhythm.

Having scheduled the time, now the question is: What shall I read? I believe that the rhythm principle is sound in relation to content as well as to form. I want to read intensively and also extensively; light and heavy, theologically and geologically, etc.

As a pastor my first intensive reading-research challenge is in terms of the main book of my life, the Bible. For me this means first of all having effective access to the major translations of the Bible now available. It means a working library of historical background and technical books. Books like Jeremias and F. F. Bruce on *New Testament History*; Metzger on *New Testament Text*; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament and Old Testament*; Brown, Driver, Briggs' *Hebrew Lexicon*, etc. I purchase exegetical and theological commentaries on a book by book basis rather than by the set.

In order to keep myself intellectually involved in theological dialogue I have pursued two reading goals. First, in regard to major theological writers, I have found that there are two ways into a heavyweight theological book: through the front door or by the window, that is, from the first page onward or through its topical, biblical reference index. Both are valid entrances into theological books. Often I find that the window route has coaxed me into reading the whole book. A second way to keep engaged with current theological discussion is through journals and magazines. I read one set of journals faithfully: *Eternity*, *Christianity Today*, *Christian Century*, *Sojourners*, *Wittenburg Door*, *Radix*,

*Theology Today*. There is another set of scholarly journals that I try to catch up on each time I visit a seminary's periodical room.

Most of the reading I have described to this point is wide and extensive, as in the case of journals, or it is research oriented, as in the case of theological books and commentaries. Another kind of reading has also been very important and rewarding for me. There are several authors with whom I have developed a special sort of friendship (they do not know me but I know them). I am trying to read all that they have written. These are authors with whom I especially resonate, and it is my goal to have in my own library a complete collection of their works. These writers have become permanent friends. They are not masters of my mind, because I may not always agree with what they write; they are more like guides and companions who especially challenge me and who continue to encourage my own pilgrimage as a Christian. I feel that I understand how they think and how they approach the serious questions. I not only read these writers, I reread them; and that is the real test of a book.

There are still other books and resources that I need because they open up some of the implications of Christian faith that as a Christian and a pastor I must pursue. I am thinking here of books on the world family, on economics, politics, psychology; books that demonstrate communication skills; books on the arts and music; books on Christian apologetics.

A third question we must ask is this: How am I to keep track of what I read and remember what needs to be remembered? The answer to this question begins with the way in which a pastor sees the study-reading task of the ministry. Is the pastor a collector, an assembler of the conclusions of others, or is the pastor a researcher-scholar who studies toward the goal of creative contribution? I believe the second model is the harder, but by far the more rewarding. All of my reading is a vital part of the total research task that goes into and alongside the writing of a sermon or a special teaching study. If this is so, then holding on to the discoveries that have resulted from reading is very important.

My own method is not complicated. I have found from my own experience that in order for me to remember what I have read, I must read carefully. Therefore, I read slowly. I take notes in my daily journal or on a separate review page, or make coded marks on the margins of the book. I do not skim or speed read the books that I feel are important. At the ends of chapters I ask myself to recount from memory the major arguments of the chapter. I find that this technique helps me to begin the process of in-depth comprehension of an author's thesis. When I have found an unusually impressive book, I offer a small group seminar/discussion on the book. This is another way to study a significant book creatively, as well as to see it through the eyes of other people.

When it comes right down to it, a book itself is a friend, and it is best remembered when we have a sense of respect for it. When I quote from authors in a sermon, my own approach is to quote few but long — that is, to make use of only a few quotations in a given sermon, but to show respect for whatever is quoted. This means allowing the quotation to speak from its own setting; it means reading enough of the quotation that the author is really heard, and not simply used to focus upon what I am saying. This approach involves more work for the preacher homiletically in establishing the context for the quotation, but it also has the benefit of encouraging the listeners to want to read that author for them-

selves. I have made for myself two rules for quotation: I do not quote from a book I have not read, and I do not quote from a typed card. I either quote from memory or read from the book itself, present and visible. In this way the book is honored, and also I believe endorsed to the listeners. It seems to me an insult to a great book like *Brothers Karamazov* to read selections from its great and moving chapters, now impertinently removed to utilitarian 3x5 cards. Such a great book deserves respect, not exploitation.

As pastors in the Christian church we stand in a long and good tradition of learning and of concern for truth. Books have their unique part to play in this lifelong obedience to truth, to which every Christian is committed. I am aware that electronic media, TV, and films play an increasingly influential part in communication within the human family, but I still maintain that when it comes to the image building of that greatest of all collectors of dreams and ideas — the human mind — there is still nothing to match a book read aloud to a child. C. S. Lewis describes Jill's encounter with the lion Aslan: "... the voice was not like a man's. It was deeper, wilder, and stronger; a sort of heavy, golden voice. It did not make her any less frightened than she had been before, but it made her frightened in rather a different way." (*Silver Chair*, p. 16.) No TV set is able to capture or highlight the vast features of that golden lion quite so wonderfully as the human imagination itself set in motion by the words of a book.

*The Book and books* make it possible for us to describe the mystery of the sea.

#### *An Unconventional Bibliography*

If I were to choose the most influential books in my own intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage, after the Bible, my list would look like this:

- Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. The sheer excitement of a Christian mind alive to the relevance of Jesus Christ.
- John Calvin, *Institutes*. His impressive grasp of the large outline of the gospel's meaning makes Calvin exciting.
- Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*. As fresh and electric today as in the 16th century.
- Karl Barth. Begin with *Dogmatics in Outline*. I deeply appreciate his boldness and his serious intention to really hear and obey the biblical text. He is the theologians' theologian.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Begin with *Cost of Discipleship*. He called out to me to decide once and for all about what matters the most in my life.
- C. S. Lewis. Begin with *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I owe so much to C. S. Lewis, especially the wonderful mixture of the surprise and the goodness of God.
- G. K. Chesterton. Begin with *The Everlasting Man*. I love his humor and ability to stir up my own imagination.
- J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*. How can anyone miss out on the journey of Frodo and Sam Gangi?
- Helmuth Thielicke. Begin with *How the World Began*. I learned about preaching from Thielicke. *HUGO*
- Tolstoy, Dostoevski, Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn. ~~Russian~~ These *Russian* writers have stirred me emotionally and spiritually more than all other novelists.
- T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden. These poets have given me a deep respect for words. *ROBT FROST*
- Mark Twain, Robert Benchley, for their rich humor and insight into personality.