

To Keep My Head Clear

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A paraphrase of one of my favorite quotations from Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* goes: "Do great things as though they are small because of Jesus Christ. Do small things as though they are great because of Jesus Christ."¹ I actually carved this inscription on a piece of Puget Sound driftwood that now sits in my office at the church to help keep my head clear. This marker influences me in two ways. First, I am encouraged by what Pascal wrote as if it were for me; second, the marker reminds me to be sure I read the book he wrote and other books too where I will find even more encouraging thoughts.

Pascal is saying that because of Jesus Christ the large matters of life can be handled incrementally, part by part, small step by small step, as though they are small when they are compared to the sheer size of the Lord of life and truth. This "because of Jesus Christ" discovery makes all the difference in charting the course of our lives and our ministries not only in their early months but throughout the whole journey. It teaches me to divide the large questions into their parts and take them on in single steps. It is also a major influence upon my preaching goals. It encourages me to take the time to share the truth of the gospel so that each sermon is sensitive to the small, single steps that add together to become the larger whole.

“Do small things. . . .” This truth is also liberating and upgrades the daily ordinary encounters of life and living. It is an alert to pastors that the work crew at a church conference may in fact be the most important people there from a strategic point of view. They are the ones you get to know the best, just like the everyday lay volunteers whom you know in an ordinary way. These creators of the small parts of the whole may in the end be the most decisive creators of healthy and lasting change. The ways that we as pastors treat the ones we work with has more permanent import for the kingdom than most of our public appearances and larger statements.

I wondered where Pascal came up with this thought, and then I realized that he borrowed it from the final words of St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Paul thanks his friends at Philippi for their help to him while he was imprisoned in Rome. They had sent a young man named Epaphroditus to help him and when Epaphroditus became ill, Paul sent him home to Philippi with a truly remarkable letter. Listen to what he says when he thanks them:

I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me. (Phil. 4:11b–14)

There is a great things—small things mixture here. Paul is saying that he can take in stride on the one side abundance (great things) and, on the other side, want (small things), because of Jesus Christ, who is his friend, his Lord, his Savior, and who is nearby (4:5).

But Paul includes harsher contrasts too—to be abased in defeats and to be honored by success. He can take these large/small contrasts in stride too. He says that he has learned the secret of how to make use of his advantages to the benefit of the ambassadorship mandate he has joined. But he also makes use of his disadvantages, even his persecutions, to the benefit of the same ambassadorship mandate. Can Paul’s secret become ours as well? What are your disadvantages and advantages? For Paul there are several: his Roman citizenship helps him, his language skill results in brilliant and totally communicative letters, the wealth of his family and his family connections helped to

rescue him from a gang of marauders who wanted to ambush him and kill him. His sister was able to inform a Roman tribune at Jerusalem (Acts 23), who then rescued Paul from the gang of forty plotters. Also, Paul has the ability to make friends. He was a likeable man whom a centurion named Julius respected so much that in a shipwreck near Malta he saved Paul's life. (Acts 27). Slaves and fellow prisoners and even guards called him their friend.

Paul also made use of his disadvantages. Imprisonments gave him the chance to write letters and share his faith with other prisoners and their guards too (Phil. 1:13). At Ephesus he could only rent Tyrannus Hall from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. each day, which seems unfortunate in the heat of the summers at Ephesus, but this happened to be the time slaves could get off work to come and hear Paul. Even this disadvantage became an asset for the ambassadorship of Paul.

I've been thinking about my own experiences in ministry here in Seattle, and I believe the natural advantages have helped me, such as the location of the church building, which is across the street from a major university. But there have also been disadvantages that have made for wonderful surprises. Our sanctuary at University Presbyterian Church is limited to twelve hundred people, which has required that we offer five worship services each Sunday. These have enabled our church to greatly expand ministries of music and Christian education opportunities, for example. The several times of worship each Sunday have become the incentive for creative innovation. For me as a preacher, preaching the same sermon five times has been positive too. I gather momentum as the day goes on.

As you begin your ministry and I continue my ministry, let Blaise Pascal's words ring in our ears: "Do great things as though they are small because of Jesus Christ. Do small things as though they are great because of Jesus Christ." But it takes a clear head to keep track of the great and the small. It takes a mind alive to find time to read a book like the *Pensées*.

I will never forget my Princeton Seminary senior class dinner. The speaker was George Buttrick, then the pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He challenged our graduating class of future pastors in two directions. First, he urged us to be with our people so that we would become pastors who understood thoughts and feelings of people where they lived and walked so that

our ministries would be culturally fluent. But his second counsel seemed to contradict the first: “When you have been on 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 know not.” He went on: “Don’t read only what your people are reading. Read what your people are not reading.”

Buttrick impressed upon us the importance of cultivating a mind that is alive. He was making the case for wholeness. In addition to being physically well and spiritually committed, we need to be intellectually alive and healthy. If we’re to be effective Christian pastors in the world, we need to learn “the mystery of the sea.” There are many ways to keep the mind alive, but I think Buttrick was right to emphasize reading. The desire to read raises questions, however. First, how can I find time to read about the mystery of the sea when I have so many important responsibilities, large and small, among the boardwalk concessions? Second, when I’ve found time, what should I read?

Each of us as pastors has been given the gift of time and the privilege of organizing it. We each have twenty-four hours a day to own and steward, with more freedom to organize our day and our week than is possible in most professions. But this gift of time has some snares, especially when we allow the hours of the week to confuse themselves into a random jumble of low-quality segments.

The first challenge confronting the pastor who wants to study and read seriously is to develop a philosophy of the week. What is the key to a healthy week? I have a one-word answer: rhythm. To have quality time for my family, for spiritual formation, work, reading, ministry to people, writing, and recreation, I need a rhythmic week. It means that I should think of my life primarily in terms of seven-day periods rather than years, months, or days. It is no mistake that the seven-day week is the biblical yardstick for life measurement. “Six days thou shalt work, and one day thou shalt rest.” It is a rhythmic week that the fourth commandment describes.

Furthermore, I can survive high-intensity demands if there is also opportunity for a respite from those demands. And I’ll enjoy my rest if it follows real work. The rhythmic contrasts such as fast-slow, many-few, rich-lean, exterior-interior, and time to keep the body healthy—time to keep the mind alive are necessary and make all the difference.

For the second question—What shall I read?—the rhythm principle also applies. I want to read intensively and extensively, light and

heavy, great and small, prose and poetry, theology and geology, the Bible and books about the Bible. I want to read and be read to.

While electronic media, TV, and film play an increasingly influential part in human communication, they can't replace books. When it comes to imagination, building within that greatest of all collectors of dreams and ideas — the human mind — there is still nothing to match a book read aloud.

In *The Silver Chair*, 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."² No television or computer screen could capture the vast features of that golden lion quite so wonderfully as the human imagination set in motion by Lewis's words. My advice to young theologians is that you find authors with whom you develop a special sort of friendship. Try to read everything they have written. They aren't masters of our minds, because we won't always agree with what they have written; they're more like companions who especially challenge and encourage our pilgrimage as Christians. They become our mentors.

I'll share my list with you. After the Bible, the following books and authors have had the most influence in my own intellectual and spiritual journey:

- *Pensées* by Blaise Pascal. The most mentally alive writer I know of.
- *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin. An impressive and exciting grasp of the large outline of the gospel's meaning.
- *Lectures on Romans* by Martin Luther. As fresh today as in the sixteenth century.
- Karl Barth. Begin with *Dogmatics in Outline*. I deeply appreciate his wholeness and his serious intention to really hear the biblical text. He is the theologians' theologian.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Begin with *Letters and Papers from Prison*. 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 Lewis, especially the wonderful mixture of good surprise added to his marvelous skill at description.

- *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien. How can anyone miss out on the journey of Frodo and Sam Gamgee?
- G. K. Chesterton. Begin with *Orthodoxy*. I love his humor and ability to stir up my own imagination.
- *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian Age* by Dorothy Sayers is brilliant and earthy.
- Helmut Thielicke. Begin with *How the World Began*. I learned about preaching from Thielicke.
- Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenitsyn. These writers have stirred me emotionally and spiritually more than all other novelists.
- T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost. These poets have given me a deep respect for words.
- Mark Twain and Robert Benchley have mastered off-the-wall humor with unique insight into personality.
- Paul Tournier possesses psychological wisdom and even-handedness. Try to find his book *Secrets*.

The best books I've read are these:

- My favorite novels are *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, and *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.
- The most impressive recent novels are *The Winds of War* by Herman Wouk and *Peace Like a River* by Leif Enger.
- The most helpful book about the Christian faith is Barth's *Dogmatics in Outline*.
- The most persuasive case for the Christian life is C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*.
- The most impressive biographies are *Karl Barth* by Eberhard Busch and *William Borden* by Mrs. Howard Taylor.

Notes

1. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968), 316. Here's the entire quotation: "Do small things as if they were great, because of the majesty of Christ, who does them in us and lives our life, and great things as if they were small and easy, because of his almighty power."
2. C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), 16.