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SHARPEN YOUR AX ALL YOU CAN

Thane Hutcherson Ury

“**A** reading people will always be a knowing people.” — John Wesley

John Wesley, *homo unius libri* (a man of one book), was an avid reader. So fervent, in fact, that he’d prop up books on his saddle as he traveled from one assignment to another. And given that he rode on horseback 250,000 miles, we can safely say he consumed a lot of books. At the zenith of his ministry, he was preaching three times daily, and his reading brought a robustness to his sermons. Samuel

Johnson even claimed that Wesley was the most widely read man in the entire country!

We can further see how serious reading was to Wesley in his view of non-readers. He once rebuked John Premboth for his lack of reading, adding that it had exceedingly hurt Premboth. “You can never be a deep preacher without [reading],” said Wesley, “any more than [you can be] a thorough Christian.” Wesley advised him to read daily, saying, “It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days, and a petty, superficial preacher. Do justice to your own soul.... Do not starve yourself any longer.” He challenged another young preacher to spend five hours every morning “in reading the *most useful* books, and that regularly and constantly.” He personally woke at 4:00 AM daily, and first gave an hour to prayer, so he was cut from a very different cloth.

He wrote, “How much shall I suffer in my usefulness if I have wasted the opportunity I once had of acquainting myself with the great lights of antiquity, the Ante-Nicene Fathers?” And to make sure that serious Christians had great reading material, Wesley gathered, extracted, edited, abridged and published prolifically. His key project was called “*A Christian Library*,” which Wesley described as the “Choicest Pieces of Practical Divinity Which Have Been Published in the English Tongue.” Between 1749 and 1755 the *Christian Library*

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reached a whopping 50 volumes, and one writer described it as “bracingly diverse and refreshingly nonpartisan.”

Wesley had so little patience with slothful ministers who neglected reading that he famously told them to “get a taste” for reading or “return to trade.” In other words, read or get out of the ministry. “If you are too lazy to read, you are too lazy to lead,” wrote Wesley.

So, if Wesley were here today, he’d likely ask us what we’re reading. He’d urge us that reading is one of the chief means to attain sound theological knowledge and to get thoroughly well-informed about our beliefs. He would add that we too can be taught, encouraged, and inspired by reading broadly on practical divinity, spiritual exhortation, scriptural instruction, and even apologetics, hymns, and poetry. The very publication you are now read-

ing, *The Arminian*, began in the 1770s as a monthly magazine to keep Methodists reading. As surely as

**Sharpen your ax all you can
with good reading.**

Methodists always had a song in their hearts, they likely had a book in their hands.

The practical benefits of reading should also be self-evident. I can think of about 20! Time on a plane, at the DMV, the doctor’s office, or waiting for an oil change, can all be redeemed. Reading invites the best minds in history to mentor you. And aside from the obvious advantage of building knowledge and confidence, the discipline of reading also enhances our cognitive processes and memory, it strengthens creativity, problem-solving and critical thinking (and thus leadership skills will rise), it inspires us by triggering the theaters of our mind and heart, it helps us speak and write more eloquently as our vocabulary blossoms, it entertains us and can make our day, it can make you an expert in something, it means you always have something fresh to share, it promotes cognitive dexterity (and may stave off dementia), it keeps us device-free

(and away from doom-scrolling), it sets a good model for our kids, grandkids, and students. And since it (mostly) reduces stress, it should also improve our sleep. And given that reading develops our grasp of the wider human condition, our empathy will certainly grow.

Now, back to Wesley. His own spiritual awakening testified to the transforming power of books. Three titles which especially circumscribed his thinking were: 1) Jeremy Taylor’s *Rules for Holy Living*, 2) Thomas à Kempis’s *The Imitation of Christ*, and 3) William Law’s *Serious Call to the Devout and Holy Life* (and even Law’s earlier work, *Treatise of Christian Perfection*). These three men added rocket fuel to Wesley’s faith, and they’re waiting to do the same with us.

God used these three authors to nudge Wesley to chase holiness more ardently, and convinced him more than ever of the utter “impossibility of being half a Christian.” But even then, Wesley was also wise enough to set limits. I’d personally love to read for 8-10 hours a day, and Wesley likely had such in mind when saying, “Beware that you are not swallowed up in books!” He knew that an ounce of love was better than a pound of knowledge, so we bibliophiles need balance, wisdom, and discernment.

The inimitable firebrand, A.W. Tozer, once heard Andy Dolbow, the American Indian preacher exhort his hearers to improve their minds for the honor of God. A serious reading regimen improves our minds like nothing else. Dolbow’s words are a fitting challenge as we dive into this issue of *The Arminian*. If we have a dull ax while chopping wood, he advised, we must work “all the harder to cut the log. A sharp ax makes easy work. So, sharpen your ax all you can.” Yes friends! Sharpen your ax all you can with good reading.

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PREACHERS-PASTORS-THEOLOGIANS-WRITERS

William Sillings

Moses, Ezra, Nehemiah, Asaph, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi. Paul, Peter, James, John, Matthew, Mark. Athanasius, Irenaeus, Polycarp, Clement, Origen, Augustine, Hus, Wyclif, Tyndale, Erasmus, Knox, Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Zwingli. Wesley, Whitefield, Fletcher, Beecher, Barnes, Clarke, Edwards, Finney, Hills, Palmer, Pope, Spurgeon, Benson, Watson, William Burt Pope, Matthew Henry. Bonhoeffer, Bruce, Fee, Marshall, Morris, Mounce, CFH Henry, Guthrie, Graham, Keener, Lucado, Oden, Oswalt, Purkhiser, Reasoner, Stanley, Waltke, Warren.

Quite an illustrious lineup of God-followers. Yes, but still just a smattering since NT history began. In Common? Most (not all) of them are from bygone eras. Many of them were/are pastors. Most of their names

you will recognize. Most are/have been prophets or preachers of one sort or another, some better than others. Some are truly great theologians – some, not so much. Some were not great theologians at all. But ALL of them have this in common: They wrote or currently write important Christian documents. Through their writing, they have all influenced Christianity for more years than they have been/will be alive on earth.

All of which leads me to the point for which I am currently writing. In the Wesleyan-Arminian heritage/movement, we are in desperate need of the following three items.

We need pastor-theologians who read much, think deeply, and pray fervently.

- We need pastors, lots of pastors. Not just preachers. Not merely credentialed career people. We need pastors. Pastors who preach a biblical doctrine of salvation from the front to back of the Book. Pastors who are committed to the final authority of Scripture as the foundation of their lives and their preaching. We need pastors who are committed to the Book of God. We need pastors committed wholeheartedly to the God of that book, to the Lord God Jesus Christ, to the people of God, to the church of God, and to the will of God. We need pastors who will be pastors for a lifetime, not merely for a year or two. We need pastors, shepherds who will guide people to the Ark of God and keep them eternally safe in it.
- We need pastor-theologians. These are pastors who read much, think long and deeply, and pray fervently over what they think, believe, read and teach. We need pastors who are certain about the certainties of Scripture, yet captivated by God's mysteries, and pastors who speak about them from a depth of soul and spirit known only to those who spend much time in God's presence. Pastors who not only practice the presence of God, but who walk with heart in the glories of heaven and shoes in the dust of earth.

Interestingly, in "Food For Thought," Kevin J. Vanhoozer, speaks to this same issue [*Outreach* 24:6 (Nov/Dec 2025) 92-93]. Vanhoozer was walking his children to school one morning, while they lived in Edinburgh, Scotland. He observed, "A couple of American tourists were visiting the Greyfriars Kirk

Cemetery, and the wife exclaimed in a scandalized voice, ‘Honey, they’ve buried two people in the same grave!’ – because the headstone read, ‘Here lies a pastor and a theologian.’” Can a pastor be both? Vanhoozer thinks so, but also that there should be no wide gap between the pastor’s education and the theologian’s education – both are the province of the church, not the academy.

Vanhoozer’s article is indeed food for thought. In the main, I agree with his premise. But the tragedy is that our culture assumes that education is the province of the academy, often an unchristian academy at that. That should not be the case. “What is learned about God in the academy is quite different from what is learned about God in the church” (Vanhoozer).

Nevertheless, we will not escape the sterility of the academy until we somehow rekindle the ancient fires of on-the-job training for the pastor who is also a theologian.

- We need pastor-theologians who write important Christian documents for today and tomorrow. These writings should reflect a simple trust in the Bible, and a deep appreciation for the truth as expounded through all of Christian history (BC and AD). We need pastor-theologians who have one hand in Scripture and the other on the shoulders of weary souls. We need pastor-theologians who

can write for the present and the future, not for sales and notoriety. We need pastors who will write for the eternal life of the world, not merely for “your best life now.” (After all, if our best life is now, what does that have to say about eternal life? On the other hand, if life *now* is not better than life *before* the impact of the life of Christ, why write anything about it?)

Perhaps you are one of the people who can meet these kinds of lofty goals. I have never met them to my full satisfaction. Nevertheless, that doesn’t keep me from dreaming, reading, thinking, writing, and hoping that many people in this world will be better off in mind, body, soul, and spirit because I have walked beside them.

I will never be famous, and I’m OK with that. But I will be faithful. That is about the most that can ever be said about any of us, I think. If the preacher at my funeral can say he has known me to be faithful, and if he can so say with conviction and integrity, I will consider that the greatest compliment of a lifetime. More than that, if at the final judgment, I can hear Jesus say to me, “you have been faithful over a few things,” well now ... THAT’s worth an eternity.

Dr. Sillings is the general superintendent of the International Fellowship of Bible Churches.

THREE MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOKS

Richard E. Clark

The Bible is doubtless the most influential book in my life. Its message led me to trust my life and eternal destiny into the care of Jesus Christ. Through faith in him, my life is more than what it would have been without him. Through faith in its message, I am a sinner saved by grace. I suspect, however, that this is not what I have been asked to consider for

this article. Assuming that I am being asked what three books have been most influential in my life, not counting the special revelation of the triune God, then I have a different set to discuss.

As I was thinking about which books to mention, I realized that there were so many books that could be counted as one of the most

influential in my life that I needed to identify a criterion by which I would narrow down my answers. Mark Noll's *Turning Points* (1997)—now in its fourth edition (2022)—discusses church history through the lens of key moments that proved to be critical turning points in the church's development. While this book is not one of my three most influential books, it helps me narrow down which three books I will discuss here as being the “most influential” non-biblical texts in my life. So, when I look at my own history, which three books led to my life's critical turning points?

I was raised in an independent Baptist context. When I became an adult, I decided to break with the hyper-fundamentalism of my youth and join a neo-evangelical Baptist community within the Southern Baptist Convention. While this was doubtless a major life turning point, it was not brought about by any texts. Besides my salvation and my turn to neo-evangelicalism, it was my journey to becoming a Wesleyan-Arminian that was to have the largest impact on the course of my life. I am a John Wesley fellow, an associate fellow with the Manchester Wesley Research Centre, a candidate for ordination in the Global Methodist Church, and a card-carrying

I was convinced that many broadly “Reformed” doctrines were true.

evangelical Arminian scholar who specializes in the retrieval of classical Arminian theology. Three books immediately come to mind when I consider how I became the sort of scholar that I am. Perhaps regrettably for my fellow Wesleyan readers, I must report that the three books that I am to name were written by Arminian Baptists. This is not surprising, however, when you consider that I read them while I was a Baptist attending a Southern Baptist seminary.

I attended graduate school at the height of neo-Calvinism, and I remember identifying Arminianism as the theology that most resem-

bled what I found in the pages of Scripture. Roger Olson's *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (2006) is the first of the three most influential books that I would like to name. Olson identifies classical Arminianism as the thread that connects the earliest Arminians with contemporary evangelical Arminians. It was through this text that I was introduced to the theologies of Jacobus Arminius (1559–1609), the early Remonstrants, John Wesley (1703–1791), and conservative Wesleyans. After finishing this text, I was convinced that I was—broadly speaking—a classical Arminian.

The second text that shaped my early conversion to Arminianism was F. Leroy Forlines's *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation* (2011). It informed my early systematic soteriology and opened me up to the possibility that regenerated Christians may be able to forfeit their individual salvations. Forlines's work further explored the theology of Arminius and provided a well-argued case for an Arminianism that did not lead to legalism or pervasive soteriological doubts.

The third text that I must mention is Robert E. Picirilli's *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (2002). I read these three books in this order and became progressively convinced of a full-orbed classical Arminian theology. Picirilli's book inspired my interest in the intramural conversations between Arminians. His book solidified my perspective on the possibility of apostasy. It also spurred me on to investigate Arminian models of divine foreknowledge and providence. After reading these three texts, I was convinced that many broadly “Reformed” doctrines were true, like penal-substitutionary atonement, original sin, total depravity, and total inability without the prevenient grace of God. Moreover, these three texts propelled me into a scholarly exploration of historic Arminian theologies. This retrieval theology led me to Methodist theology and to my transition to Wesleyan

Methodism. I would recommend all these books today, even though I am no longer a Free Will Baptist.

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THREE MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOKS

Cricket Albertson

T.S. Eliot writes, “It is unlikely, in the mass of letterpress, that the profoundest and most original works will reach the eye or command the attention of a large public, or even of a good number of the readers who are qualified to appreciate them.”

Although true in the public realm, the Holy Spirit has been an amazing tutor in my own life, leading me sometimes to unexpected books which have made substantial impacts on my life. Early on, I discovered that He will lead an honest reader to the material needed to further our understanding of God and His ways. From a young age, the Spirit of Jesus answered my questions through literary works, missionary biographies, theological books and works of fiction. When at a crossroads in life, He would often lead me to pick up a book and read. As I read the witness of another, I would encounter the Spirit of truth and find His direction for my own life. At each point of my spiritual journey, including my love story with my husband, Jesus showed up in my life through books. The stories of others written to communicate truth changed and challenged my provincial and self-centered perspective.

The short stories of O’Henry, the poetry of George Herbert, novels by Leo Tolstoy gripped me in my college years and made me aware of the world outside myself. C. S. Lewis, Phoebe Palmer, Catherine Booth, Samuel Brengle, Isobel Kuhn, Hudson Taylor, and Amy Carmichael captured my heart and imagination in my twenties and aroused a hunger in me for a deeper personal reality with Christ. Tom Torrance, Thomas Kuhn, Emil Caillet, Pope John Paul II, Dennis Kinlaw,

John Oswalt influenced me as I attempted to keep pace as a theological assistant to Dr. Kinlaw, constantly reading so that I could hold a conversation which would further his work. Their witness gave an understanding that Christian faith and doctrine were not only a personal experience to be shared but a solid intellectual and theological foundation on which a life could be built. The sermons of James Stewart and Samuel Chadwick and F. B. Meyer anchored my faith in Scripture and drew me back to what was most important – not theological ideas but the living Word of God. Miroslav Volf’s book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, jolted me awake during COVID, and I will never forget his description of the Prodigal Son’s Father and the “other.” I have never looked at people the same. *Born for Battle* by Arthur Matthews described the real spiritual warfare involved in following Christ and what is required to take my position in Christ Jesus. His sobering word to this idealistic soul, “There is no spiritual vacation,” haunted me in a beautifully practical way. Rodney Stark’s *The Rise of Christianity* and Kenneth Crider’s *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* have given a clearer understanding of the way God works in history and the place God has for women in His redemptive story. I am reading now *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* which is of the same vein.

Born for Battle by Arthur Matthews

Out of his own missionary experience in China during the communist takeover, Arthur Matthews writes the lessons he learned about

prayer and spiritual warfare. In 31 chapters, Matthews encourages believers to take their position in Christ Jesus at the right hand of the Father according to Colossians 3:1-3 and pray from that position, declaring that the only way to defeat the enemy is from above. This book invites us to take seriously the cost of discipleship, the fellowship of His sufferings, and the joy of knowing Him in life and even unto death. His words have impacted me and changed the way I come to Him in prayer.

***The Rise of Christianity by
Rodney Stark and The Patient
Ferment of the Early Church by
Kenneth Crider***

Stark, a sociologist, and Crider, a historian, both outline the rise of the early church and describe how this unlikely web of ordinary people transformed a culture, a society and ultimately the trajectory of human history. Both describe the characteristics and values of the early Christians that left such a lasting and transformative impact on society. The role of Christian women in the early church is given particular attention along with the incredible social change that they facilitated. These

women of the early church were agents of social change to such a great degree that it caught the attention and the ire of Julian the emperor.

Current evangelical American discussions of the role of women in the church seem mundane and circular compared to the extraordinary opportunities and power that God has given to women in His redemptive story. Perhaps our small paradigms are no match for God's plans.

The Temple by George Herbert

I was introduced to George Herbert in a college literature class, and his writing marked and defined my understanding of the beau-

ty, the challenge, and the paradoxes of faith. In his poem, *Prayer*, he employs a series of unlikely metaphors to describe the privilege of conversation with the Triune God. He concludes with these four images describing prayer: "Church-bells beyond the starres heard, the souls blood, the land of spices, something understood." His words captivated my heart then and still to this day. Communion with Christ is the music of the Milky Way, the blood of Christ poured out, the intimacy of marriage, and the internal depth of personhood. Somehow, in his writing, I began to find expression for my own growing faith and an invitation to know creatively and intellectually the One who gave Himself for the world.

By Searching by Isobel Kuhn

By Searching was the first book I read by Isobel Kuhn, and it describes her initial walk with Jesus. Personal and easy to digest, her story reads like a cheerful memoir of a beginning Christian life, a young girl on a quest to discover the reality of God and His goodness. In her seeking, Jesus proves Himself to her despite her youth, her inexperience, and her cynicism. She responds to His love by entering a covenant with Him which consequently determines every aspect and detail of her life story. Her witness reminds us that God will prove Himself to those who seek Him honestly. He will be faithful to those in covenant with Him, even those who begin in immaturity and uncertainty. The one who seeks Him will find Him.

***25 Sunday Mornings with
Samuel Chadwick***

My mama loved this little book, and she introduced me to it several years ago. It is now out of print, but repeatedly I have reached for this volume to draw me back into the love and presence of Jesus. Chadwick's sermons bring Scripture to life, and his application to personal life is pointed, specific and timely. Though he preached these sermons at the turn of the

twentieth century, they have lost none of their power. I recommend this to every earnest follower of Jesus.

Cricket Albertson is executive director of Titus Women, Inc

THREE INFLUENTIAL BOOKS IN MY LIFE

Vinicius Couto

Reading transforms lives, shapes world-views, inspires actions, and guides personal paths. I have read many books since surrendering my life to Christ, and I confess that it is a very difficult exercise to select only three that have influenced me. Much good literature will be left out of this selection. However, I have chosen three that opened paths to principles and values that have guided my Christian and ministerial life as a pastor and educator.

The Bible: The Primary Source of Spiritual Thirst

The first and most impactful is *the Bible*, the revealed Word of God. Far from being a cliché, its influence began in a transformative family context. While my entire family converted to Christ, I was the last, stubbornly resisting divine grace. At 19 years old, newly converted, an insatiable thirst for God's will consumed me. I set myself the goal of reading the entire Scripture in six months, devouring about seven chapters a day. This discipline was not merely an intellectual exercise; it was an existential immersion that restructured my identity.

With each page I read, a greater thirst was generated within me. On some days, I read far more than 7 chapters, and therefore finished reading it in about 3 to 4 months. The Bible taught me to prioritize obedience to the Word above human traditions, fostering a personal and unwavering faith. It became the foundation of my faith. Several other times I read it in its entirety. And, over time, I learned to do specific readings, as the medievals did: *lectio divina* (a more devotional reading of the text),

Lectio continua (a continuous reading aimed at the complete and sequential completion of sacred texts) and *Lectio Estudio* (a more attentive, studious, reflective reading).

Heroes of Faith: Awakening to a Literary Vocation

The second book, *Heroes of Faith* by Orlando Boyer, despite its hagiographic tone, illuminated paths of radical surrender. It presents biographies of missionaries and leaders who, even at a young age—some under 20—published impactful works and sacrificed everything for the King of God's Kingdom. This narrative challenged me: if they, at a tender age, did so much and dared to write for the glory of God, why should I hesitate? It wasn't just the men of the Bible who surrendered with such boldness. There were many others, after all!

Released in 1949, the book emphasizes heroes such as Martin Luther, John Wesley, Hudson Taylor, Dwight L. Moody and many others, whose lives exemplify spiritual boldness. It sparked in me the desire to produce. My first devotional book came out when I was 30 years old. It was based on a sermon I preached, entitled "The Three Tears of Joseph." In the sermon and the book, I showed that, for many years, Joseph kept his emotions bottled up, but when he reunited with his brothers, a series of feelings were rekindled, generating divine healing in his soul.

My first theological book, in turn, was published when I was 32 years old. Since then, I have published about 20 other theological books, contributing to the Arminian

-Wesleyan tradition in the areas of biblical, historical, and practical theology; I have also translated more than 20 theological books from English into Portuguese; and I have published more than 20 scientific articles. I can say that Boyer showed me that writing is not an academic luxury; it doesn't merely serve intellectualism; books can be missionary tools, they can reach places we are unable to go. And, by the grace of God and for His glory, people from various parts of Brazil have been able to reflect on the themes I have produced.

The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Tolerance and Depth

The third, *History of Controversies in Christian Theology* by Roger Olson, was read when I was 31 years old, while I was hospitalized due to complications from a thrombosis that developed into a pulmonary embolism. At the time, the doctor said I didn't die because God didn't want me to! My District Superintendent traveled about 400 kilometers to visit me in the hospital and saw me with several books in my room, reading and writing while recovering from treatment.

This work by Olson broadened my ecclesial vision. The author traces debates from the Church Fathers to the 20th century, defending an evangelical theology centered on historical orthodoxy without sectarian rigidity. I learned that tolerance for dissent is possible, and that we should have an ideal of promoting unity in diversity. It's difficult, but it's possible. Calvinists and Arminians, for example, share the belief that salvation is by grace through faith. And they can be proactive and engaged in the kingdom of God, instead of fighting each other on social media.

This period in the hospital was conducive to reflection: the book balanced my faith and my communication of God's Word when I read that Olson proposed, in this work, to be simple without being simplistic. I adopted this for my ministry. I understood that it is possible to produce quality theology, with piety combined with intellectual depth. It was soon after reading it that I began writing theological books and haven't stopped since.

Dr. Couto serves as senior pastor at First Church of the Nazarene in Vinhedo, São Paulo, Brazil.

THREE BOOKS THAT HAVE INFLUENCED MY LIFE *Mark Horton*

My old theology professor from Bible college used to quote Francis Bacon to us: "Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man." He would sometimes follow that quote up with this statement of his own, "If a preacher stays 15-20 years at the same church, he will have to give something more than his testimony." I have pondered those quotes many times over the years.

All of us know there is a difference among books as surely as there is among people. Something of a person's character gets into

their writing. You feel as if you know something about that person once you have read their thoughts. I have read books that were like walking through the desert. You literally had to push yourself to get through them. Others are refreshing like a drink from a mountain stream. They revive your spirit, encourage your soul, and make you glad they crossed your path. There is another category that I would dare to call life-changing books. These are few and far between in my experience. But these books reorient your paradigm, answer questions about life that have long

needed answers, and you find yourself going back to them repeatedly. They become a reference in your mind and library. You read them several times.

One of the life-changing books for me is Dallas Willard's *Spirit of the Disciplines*. I ran into this book back in the mid-nineties although it was published in 1988. The subtitle is "Understanding How God Changes Lives." This book helped me understand the power of good habits in our daily life. It is one thing to have good habits and for me it was another to understand their place and power in our lives. As I read this book, every chapter seemed like an eye opener to me. I marked it up, made notes in the margin and eventually bought a Kindle version so I could attach more notes. This also allowed me to have it with me everywhere I went. I believe the concept that helped me most was understanding that Jesus'

**Reading maketh a full man;
conference a ready man; and
writing an exact man.**

life was not only one in which we need to know what he taught, but he was living an example in daily life so

we would know how to live. The life and the words are a package. We need both. The habits of his daily life were meant to become those of his followers.

This was my introduction to Dallas, who went to heaven in 2013. I now have 21 books written by him or about him and have read most of them. I went through several of his podcasts online as well. I can say, Dallas has changed my life and ministry. It all began with *Spirit of the Disciplines*. Dallas was a teacher at University of Southern California teaching in the School of Philosophy for over 40 years. He was also ordained as a Baptist minister. Dallas is not always easy reading. I heard one of his doctoral students say once that Dallas' book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, was on his bedside table for nearly 11 years. When you read it you will understand that comment. It is good and it will make your brain hurt. Dallas makes you

think.

Another book I would put in the life change section is actually a three volume set by my close friend and mentor, Vic Reasoner. *The Fundamental Wesleyan Systematic Theology* was published in 2021 so it is fairly recent. Vic has written nearly 40 books and he and I have had access to one another for nearly 30 years. Vic is my go-to guy on theological questions and has been an immense asset to me. I have read nearly all his books and have been something of a proofreader of several before they go to publishing. That was the case with this three volume set. Vic, to me, is the authority on early Methodism. Why is that important? John and Charles Wesley led and saw the longest-lasting revival in history. It spanned nearly a hundred years. In my mind, a person who is used of God in that degree deserves attention. He and his followers believed that the revival they saw was one of a renewal of apostolic teaching and living. In other words, Wesley believed they were seeing Christianity lived again as it had been in the pages of our New Testament. Many revivals came close or tended to emphasize one of more aspects of it. But the Wesleyan revival got it all.

The same theology teacher who quoted Francis Bacon to us in college also said, "Fellows, if you follow Wesley, Adam Clarke, Richard Watson, John Fletcher, William Burt Pope, you will not miss the truth very far." I have never forgotten that. As I proofread Vic's three volumes I remember thinking to myself, "I see the value of writing theology later in life where experience and knowledge are in greater degree. All of Vic's writings are good, and I had urged him to do a theology years before; but to me this was the cream of the crop. Using his knowledge of all the early Methodists as well as a comparison to most of the contemporary theologians, especially Wesleyans, Vic weighs in on about every aspect of theology and cultural values the church faces today. It is a marvelous set and I also bought the Kindle version of this so I could search all three vol-

umes to get a quote that comes back to mind. I use it often. It is enlightening and inspiring. Thank you, Vic, for all your hard work. What a gift to the church this set is.

The last book I would put on this list is John Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. I picked this up for the first time in my very first pastorate back in 1987. I had grown up in the holiness movement, been inspired by some truly great lives; but in all honesty, I had more questions about entire sanctification than anything else. I just could not see it in the Scriptures using the references the holiness movement had given me in the 26 years of living in their midst. In exasperation I remember praying one day and saying to God, "If you do not help me see this in the Scriptures, I will not preach it." I was reminded of my professor's words about the early Methodists and purchased a copy of Wesley's standard on the subject. Its question and answer format appealed to me. Its heavy reliance on Scripture convinced me. The understanding that behind the words I was reading were the experiences of literally thousands of people that Wesley and his leaders had interacted with all across England was assuring. As I read, I would say sometimes out loud, "Why didn't someone tell me this?" So many of the very questions I had asked were there

with great biblical answers for them. I wept, prayed and aspired to be the kind of person I was reading about in those pages. Since those days I have heard others say that Wesley himself never claimed the blessing. But a close reading of this booklet convinced me that the ability to raise and answer the questions as he and his men did could only come from those who had a genuine experience of many years. It restored my confidence in the Scriptures especially on entire sanctification. I have attempted to preach this doctrine ever since. This book is something of a measuring stick in my life. I try to read the *Plain Account* every two years. I want to know how I am doing in my walk with God. Since it leans so heavily on the Scriptures, it is safe.

It has been the treasured book on my life change list right next to my Bible. It caused me to want to know the man behind the book and began a lifelong quest to know and understand Wesley, his methods and teaching. This has helped my ministry immensely. I praise God for good people and good books. What a means of grace they have been to me.

Mark Horton pastors Faith United Community Church in Nicholasville, KY. He is also the treasurer for the Fundamental Wesleyan Society.

THE INFLUENCE OF BOOKS IN MY LIFE AND MINISTRY

Joe Chukwumah

The influence of books in my life and ministry is quite significant. First, I must state that books were not readily available around me when growing up, having been raised in a home where both parents were not literate. They both loved the Lord and on more than one occasion I have seen my mother regret the fact that she could not read the Bible, so

as to be able to discover more things about the Lord for herself from the Holy Scriptures. It was from the high school that I discovered books; and some years later, I visited an uncle in the city who was a journalist and he had in his personal collection a considerable amount of books in his library. Everywhere was filled with books – from his dining room

to his bedroom. That in itself made a deep impression on me, because I came to love books. Be that as it may, with the benefit of hindsight, I now know that not all the books were healthy for consumption to a young Christian mind. Some of the books justify syncretism. Coming from a background whose family church was liturgical, I got to know the Lord in my teenage years and I had no basic knowledge about the Bible and its doctrines, nor the things that pertain unto salvation.

It was therefore not a little relief when I came in contact with a little pamphlet titled *Holiness Made Easy* by W. F. Kumuyi, where he explained the experience I was going through then. Before my salvation experience, I had a long struggle with overcoming the sinful life to no avail. To my pleasant surprise, however, after my conversion, I noticed the absence of

those sinful habits due to no efforts of mine. As the said book made me to understand, it was no longer I that was living the life but the

indwelling Christ through his Spirit. Oh, what a joy and freedom that brought to my life. It was a new life indeed I found and enjoyed. Reading that book with my Bible made so much meaning to me then. It taught me that we are set apart from sin, Satan, self and the world unto God and we should live in newness of life, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. This book gave me a head start in spiritual formation, and in it I first encountered the concept of holiness and sanctification.

The second book that significantly affected my transformational experience was Oswald Chambers' daily devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest*. This book deepened my Christian experience and helped me in no small way in my daily walk with God. As at the time I was going into ministry, I hadn't the privilege of a theological training and I had little or no reference materials for my Bible

studies, Sunday schools and sermon preparations. The daily short devotionals I found in this book proved very helpful in this regard. This book gave both depth and inspiration to my life and ministry at this time and till this day I still cherish it.

When I came to West Africa Theological Seminary, I believe by the leading of the Holy Spirit, my motivation for ministry was at an all time low. I believe I was experiencing a burn out syndrome then and God sent the American facilitators Dr. Dan Finch, of the blessed memory and Dr. William Sillings, on rescue mission without their knowing it.

Both lecturers spoke directly to my need and even visited our congregation at different times. This event marked a turning point in my life and ministry. Dr. Sillings gave us a very important book authored by Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning*, which detailed virtually much of the things I needed to know in organizational leadership. The author explained how organizations grow, plateau and decline, and how to instigate new cycles of growth. The book has all we need to know about strategic church management, vision analysis, purpose, mission and strategic planning. This book has helped me in running the ministry and has been at the core of what I teach other church leaders in the apostolic leadership outreaches we host, of which over six hundred church leaders across the denominations have benefited from.

In all, I will say, access to good books have helped to shape my life and ministry and I am forever grateful to friends and mentors who have invested so much in books in my life. Through their help I have a better library today and that has in turn made the quality of our service to God and humanity better. That which they have committed into our hands, we will continue to commit to the hands of faithful men.

Dr. Joe Chukwumah serves as the head pastor of Living Seed Propagators Ministries in Nigeria.

Access to good books has helped to shape my life and ministry.

The condescending question has been posed: “You don’t believe that book of man-made fairy tales, do you?” Do you mean: have I, will I, do I place my faith in the inspired (God-breathed), eternal, unchanging, preserved, inerrant, relevant Word of God, the Holy Bible?

YES! Without shame or apology! God’s Word=the foundation of our faith! Romans 10:17 “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

The Bible=the Word of God...

It has been berated and debated.

It has been doubted and denied.

It has been banned and misused.

It has been mocked and neglected.

It has been misinterpreted and maligned.

Yet it has weathered the skepticism of atheists and withstood the insults of the intellects and survived the onslaught of enemies.

I believe in divine miracles, the creation of the world by God, the sinfulness of man, the existence of a devil and evil spirits, and in the eternal soul of man. I also believe in the virgin birth of Jesus, the sinless life of Jesus, the divinity of Jesus, the claims of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus, the sufficient, atoning

work of Jesus, the hope of the second coming of Jesus, and the authority of Jesus. I believe these things because the Bible confirms it. The world might laugh at me, the infidels can scorn me, and the academia may question my sanity. So be it. The Bible is alive, authoritative, and life-altering. It is a beacon of truth and continues to shine in a world of spiritual and moral darkness. Its promises are valid. Its warnings are pertinent. Its counsel is wise. Its examples are teachable. Its history is accurate. Its prophecies are true. Its relevance is current. Its value is inimitable. Its preservation is marvelous. Its wisdom is superior. Its benefits are numerous. Its power is astonishing.

“The B-I-B-L-E, yes that’s the book for me, I stand alone on the Word of God the B-I-B-L-E.” Praying you continue to discover comfort, strength, inspiration, renewal, courage, confidence and fresh revelations of Jesus in the Bible. What a privilege to preach Jesus from the Bible!

Pastor Hight lives in Duncansville, PA and is affiliated with the International Fellowship of Bible Churches.

REVIEWS

Dennis Prager. *If There is No God: The Battle Over Who Defines Good and Evil.* New York: Broadside Books, a Division of Harper Collins Publishers, 2026.

Dennis Prager calls himself a “religious Jew,” which has a very specific meaning in his terminology. To be religious, in Prager’s view, is more than just going to synagogue every Shabbat. It includes fashioning one’s thought and behavior around God and the Hebrew

Bible (the Old Testament), particularly the Torah, which he states is the Bible’s holiest section.

The 13th of Prager’s most significant publications, this relatively short volume was delivered to stores in the last week of February, already #2 on Amazon be-

fore it ever hit the shelves. My order was one of those preorders. The book's content is an edited version of a recorded four-day conversation with about 75 Jewish young people, – apparently from primarily secular/non-religious Jewish homes. The audience is given freedom to ask questions and raise objections throughout the sessions. There are no chapter headings, only questions and answers, point and counterpoint. Prager writes from three major premises throughout the book, summarizing them in the final pages of his conversations with his audience (pp. 217-220).

- There is a vast distinction between values and feelings. Feelings are subjective and not trustworthy for guiding behavior. In contradistinction, values are based on objective criteria and are, therefore, the only legitimate or trustworthy bases for societies' actions. No matter how one feels about an issue, actions should be guided by values based upon objective criteria. Acting from a base of values, rather than a base of feelings, is the only way to produce a good and safe society.
- God is necessary for values to be objective. "Only with God-based morality does an objective morality exist" (p. 104). For Dr. Prager, the objective criteria for values come from God, and, most particularly, from the Torah. If there is no God, we have no objectivity for determining the value of behavior. We would have only shifting human opinions (relativism/secularism) to determine what is right or wrong. Opinions without objective criteria are based on feelings. Therefore, true

values require Someone higher than humans to determine what is right or wrong. Interestingly, but not illogically, Prager does not argue the *existence* of God. Instead, he argues for the *necessity* of God for objective moral values, behavior, safe societies. He demonstrates that the 20th century was the most secularized (i.e. godless) century in history and, therefore, also the bloodiest century in history. Literally hundreds of millions of people were slaughtered in the 20th century because evil men acted upon egregiously incorrect beliefs that murdering millions of people as "doing good for mankind."

- This leads to Prager's third major premise. Man is not inherently good. We would agree with that statement. But Prager says that we are a mixture of good and bad, selfishness and goodness. In this he describes the life of a human as a constant battle with our natures to do what is right instead of wallowing in what is wrong. While not a New Testament believer, Prager's writing about this perspective sounds almost exactly like the life Paul describes in Romans 7 – the natural man wrestling with God over who's in charge. Prager states: "The belief that man is good became widespread in Western society at exactly the same time Western society became secular. It was not a coincidence. These two ideas – that "there is no God and people are basically good – render making a better world virtually impossible" (p. 218).

—William Sillings

**Thane Hutcherson Ury. *Random Neural Firings of a Wayfaring Missionary Kid*.
Evansville, Fundamental Wesleyan Publishers, 2025. ISBN: 9798277603598.**

Random Neural Firings is Dr. Thane Ury's initial response to requests that he publish some of his daily social media posts in book form. Gathering these daily reflections into book form serves to augment their impact. *Most* of the book's 20 chapters can be read in less than five minutes each. But their combined spiritual impact far surpasses the time it takes to read them.

Readers will quickly discern that this book was not written by a person who merely *talks* about the Kingdom, but by a man who *walks his talk* every day. Thane's life reinforces his words. His writing encourages us (me!) to walk the talk as well.

The book contains well-told stories about Christians who have *quietly* but *powerfully* impacted their world through living (and dying) for the sake of

Christ. Some were brutally martyred. All were effective witnesses to Christ's Lordship and majesty in places that were not particularly conducive to Christianity. Each chapter also features biblical reflections about issues faced in devoted Christian living.

I read *Random Neural Firings* a total of four times over a period of a couple of weeks. These readings formed a significant part of my evening devotional process and did me a great amount of spiritual good – as it likely would for you also. During those weeks, I engaged in serious spiritual introspection, which has served to develop my thinking over the weeks since. “Could I live like these Christians lived?” “Where can my spiritual life use improvement? Where could my

commitment to the work of His Kingdom be bolstered?” “In what ways have I become too comfortable?” “Would I stand strong, as the people in these pages stood?” “Is Christ pleased with my level of devotion to Him?” These reflections have continued to drive me to fervent prayer and renewed action.

This book is worth far more than its cost. I heartily recommend it. —*William Sillings*



TRIBUTE TO CHARLES MARION BROWN

July 10, 1943–February 18, 2026

— Vic Reasoner —

Marion came into my life when he went to Brent, Alabama to hold a revival for Bobby Brush in 1977. They read together Wesley's sermons and Marion was born again. I became a junior partner in the lifelong friendship between Bobby and Marion.

The following year Marion had Bobby come to Indiana to preach to his congregation. In that meeting Brush was threatened with physical violence. Opposition was so hot that a trial was set for Brown by the Midwest Pilgrim Holiness Church. He resigned rather than endure any more controversy.

The Fundamental Wesleyan Society was organized in 1979 as the Wesleyan Ministers Association, and *The Arminian* magazine was launched in 1980. Marion served as president for many years. I still remember getting a postcard in the mail from him. His penmanship was striking. He probably wrote it on the steering wheel of a bus in between routes. He had written to encourage me. That was in 1989 and he never stopped checking on me.

Our founder, A. J. Smith, had gone to China as a missionary in the 1920s. When revival broke out he got truly saved and he said after that he was “a speckled bird” among the holiness people. His church put him under a gag order in 1951.

He mentored Elmer Long, who was put on church trial in 1947. Long partnered with Homer Sawyer. Norman and Bobby Brush came to the same convictions and Bobby mentored Marion. These men were all my mentors. Across fifty years of ministry leadership, I have been put under a gag order four times. And so across a hundred years, we are still “speckled birds.” We know what we believe but not where we fit. John Wesley had a similar problem. He was an ordained clergyman 13 years before he was born again. After that the pulpits of the Church of England were closed to him. In our case, when the pulpits closed, we started publishing.

We published our first book in 1991 and have published 56 more since then. Every book originated from our publishing house on 2120 Culverson Ave. #57 was released on Feb 18.

Marion was involved in all of this and much more. As our leader he had to give prior approval for everything that I published as general editor.

During the COVID crisis we started meeting twice monthly as a group face-to-face through Zoom. For the last five years I have never gone beyond about two weeks without seeing and praying with him. Marion would frequently exhort us. Often he prayed heaven

and earth together. I think it was earlier this year that he began to quote the lyrics of a song:

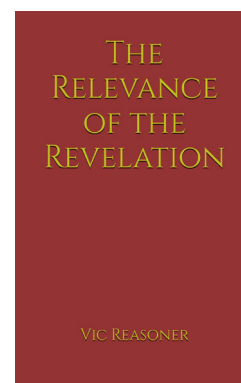
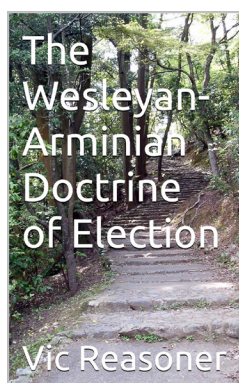
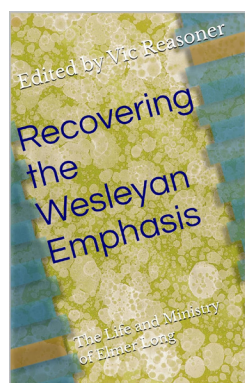
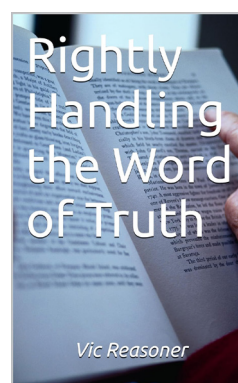
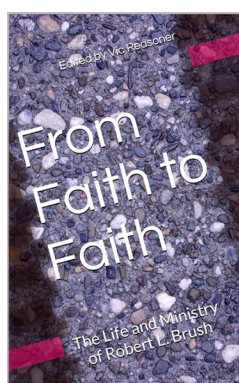
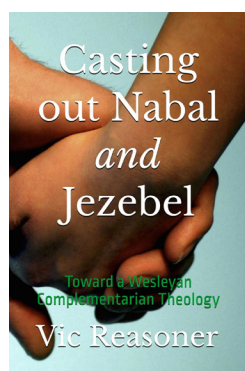
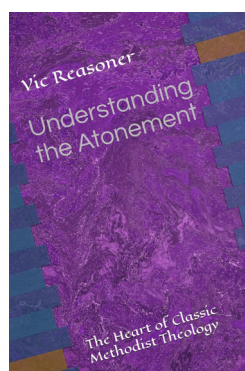
On the other side of Jordan there's construction
On a mansion being built just for me.
Just wait til you see my brand new home.
I'm expecting any day to move right in.

Well, he did move in on Feb 18! He leaves quite a vacancy here, but we celebrate his promotion. Every

original signer of our 1979 organizational document has now gone on. Speaking on behalf of our president, Dr. Thane Ury and “speckled birds” all over the world, I am here to express our condolences to you his family and friends. We have no regrets. “Heaven will be cheap at any price.” Don’t miss it for the world!

Dr. Reasoner serves as general editor for Fundamental Wesleyan Publications.

NEW BOOKS BY VIC REASONER



All these titles are available on Amazon in paperback or Kindle.
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