

Advice on choosing books

There are a vast number of Christian resources available to believers today, and most of these are either of little worth or are downright damaging. Solid, doctrinally sound and edifying books are rarely found in the top 20 Christian best-sellers, but are often found in second-hand bookstores or on certain Christian bookstore websites. The question is: how does a young disciple know what is safe?

Well, there are various lists of good books given by people like myself, and these are a start. But when you come across a book that appears to have much to offer, what can you do to check if it is OK before you waste money on it, or to stop you reading 150 pages before you realise it is not helpful?

These are some pointers that may help you.

Establish a mental list of good authors

Clearly this will take time and experience, but checking up on previous sound catalogues and resources can help. Spurgeon produced a great catalogue of commentaries that he variously rates. This is available in book form and on-line and will help for authors available up to his death in 1892.¹ Apart from getting his advice on particular commentaries, one can also develop a mental list of sound expositors and what to avoid.

Make notes of those authors who are referred to with esteem by a good author that you have read. Teachers often warmly quote other writers or refer to valuable sources in footnotes; remember these.

Perusing the past catalogues of reasonably sound publishers will also lead to a list of sound authors. Now some of these publishers have slipped in recent years but their past catalogues fare better. Examples of these would include: Banner of Truth, IVP (formerly IVF), Baker, Eerdmans and Zondervan.

A problem to beware of is that there are times when rogue authors appear in a good tradition. For instance, a writer gets a reputation as a good Calvinist and over time becomes an accepted authority of that tradition; then he veers off course or adopts some heresy or supports an outright heretic.

For example, Mark Noll is an esteemed Reformed writer in the States who has co-edited an encyclopaedia of Reformed leaders in America. Yet this same man has written a book that is very supportive of near Pelagian CG Finney. Clearly a man who supports someone who believed that we regenerate ourselves cannot be trusted as a teacher of Reformed theology. Again, John Piper is flavour of the month in many Reformed circles today and yet he is very supported of arch-Amyraldian Andrew Fuller² and believes in two contradictory wills in God's decree (he is also a near Charismatic). If he can't see that Fuller distorted the Gospel how can he be trusted with it? Yet Piper has written some helpful studies on glorifying God. This shows how much care is needed today.

¹ At the time of writing this was available at: <http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/c&c.htm> and http://www.preteristarchive.com/Books/1890_spurgeon_commentaries.html

² Actually Fuller is worse than an Amyraldian and close to Socinianism.

Consider reviews

Note the reviews of books by men that you know are fundamentally sound. For example, though I disagree with the Free Offer position of Peter Masters, notwithstanding I recognise him as a genuine Calvinist, in the Baptist tradition. Over the last few decades he has distributed many great books in the Metropolitan Bookshop attached to the Metropolitan Tabernacle in Elephant & Castle, London. Each year he sends out catalogues listing what's available and commenting upon books in stock. These give usually excellent reviews of authors and enable one to build up a picture of the good and useful. Collecting past editions of these catalogues (if that is possible) would be a useful learning resource.

Establish a list of bad authors

Get to know who the heretics are out there (you should do this for your own safety anyway). In doing so you will not only avoid books by these heretics, but you will also know that if they recommend a certain book then it is likely to be unsound.

Make a list of sound publishers

One can begin to get a feel for publishers of sound books over time. The problem is that all publishers occasionally publish unhelpful books and this mars this point. No publisher that I know of can be completely trusted. Nevertheless, a list of decent publishers has some value. These would include: Still Waters Revival Books, Sprinkle, Soli Deo Gloria, P&R, RFPA, Banner of Truth, IVP (formerly IVF), Baker (especially Baker Academic), Tentmaker, Pickering & Inglis, Evangelical Press, Kregel, Tyndale, Eerdmans, some from Marshall Morgan & Scott, a few from Moody Press, some from Paternoster and Zondervan (especially Zondervan Academic and Regency Reference Library). [Several of these have now ceased trading but are common in second-hand bookstores.]

Other 'Christian' publishers include: Word, Nelson, Crossway, Multnomah, Bagster, Diasozo Trust, Bethany, etc. but these are very mixed. Examples: Nelson published the excellent *New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* by Robert L Reymond and Shedd's 3-volume *Dogmatic Theology*.

The publishing arm of doctrinally conservative church denominations are usually helpful (such as RFPA & P&R which are US Presbyterian and EP which is UK Reformed Baptist / FIEC) even though we may disagree with some aspects of their theology.

Larger publishing houses, that produced all sorts of books, also put out the occasional solid evangelical works; examples include: Hodder & Stoughton, Methuen, John Murray, James Clarke, T&T Clarke, Eyre & Spottiswood, MacDonald, Rivingtons and Allen & Unwin. Even the liberal SCM & SPCK sometimes produce a useful paperback. Examples: James Clarke published a two-volume edition of Calvin's *Institutes*, Martin Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, and C Hodge's three-volume *Systematic Theology*. Rivington's published Henry Alford's *NT Commentary* in 5 volumes.

Make a list of unsound publishers

This may be more tricky and take more time, but it can still be done with a little research.

Now the problem is that, occasionally, an unsound publishing house will publish a very good book, so hard rules cannot be established. However, it is a guide to know the theological background of publishing houses.

For instance, Moody Press originates from a Dispensational framework and books focusing on that will be unhelpful to the Reformed student; yet some of their books are valuable, especially technical works such as *'The Inspiration & Authority of Scripture'* by Rene

Pache and several books by AW Pink. Kingsway books (formerly Victory Press) were a popular, paperback publishing house that produced a number of 'Higher Life' works, a great many charismatic works and many sloppy, superficial works; some that were outright heresy. Yet occasionally they put out a useful book, such as '*Chosen for Good*' by Peter Lewis, et. al. and several helpful biographies.

Check out the bibliography

If you have a book that looks interesting but you are uncertain, scan through the bibliography. This will give a very good clue as to the background of the author.

I once looked at a book on the atonement (can't remember the author) that was held in esteem by many. I perused the bibliography and discovered that there was not a single evangelical author quoted or referred to, but there were hordes of liberal scholars listed. This told me enough to know that this book was not for me.

As you develop an understanding of who is good and who isn't, you will be able to quickly scan a bibliography and get a rough understanding of the theological bent of the author.

Now solid academic discussions will refer to false teachers as well as good teachers so you need to get a feel about how the bibliography is weighted. Looking at the reference footnotes will help. Are the bad works quoted to make a point and are identified as bad works in the notes? Are sound writers quoted with esteem or are they derided?

Check out the endorsements

If the book is endorsed by several people that you respect and trust, then there is a good chance that the book will be useful for you. This doesn't always work but it often does. Again, you must begin to make lists of trustworthy authors, even if you haven't read their works.

However, some writers change their position over time; a few begin as sound commentators and end up as compromisers or heretics, so you must keep abreast of the times. For instance, JI Packer was once a very consistent Calvinist and wrote some extremely important works. However, since moving to the US / Canada he has sided with the ecumenical move towards Rome and has also appeared to support moderate Charismatic worship. He is not an outright heretic (as some claim) but has made compromises. Such things must be kept in mind.

Check out the foreword

If the foreword is written by a sound theologian or preacher, there is a good chance that the book will be OK. Again, you need to develop a list of good men in general first. I once bought a Victorian book on doctrine by an unknown author when I was young because it was endorsed, in the foreword, by the *Sword & Trowel Magazine* under Spurgeon's influence. It turned out to be a very useful help to a young student.

Read the preface and study the contents page

The preface should give you a glimpse of the purpose of the book and a précis of its chief points. This should give you a clue as to how helpful this book will be. By checking the contents you can see if the book actually delivers what the title claims. Often a book is titled in one way but actually preaches something else. If the preface is full of waffle, expect little content in the book. If the preface is extremely technical and complicated, the book may not be suitable to inexperienced readers.

Read some sample pages

If you have time, read a few pages and see if the book appears to have value or not. A book may initially appear interesting because of the cover, but the actual content is dry, pedantic, technical and useless. Some commentary series are so technical that it is clear they have been written to impress the author's professorial peers with care little for edifying the average believer. Long quotes in Latin, Greek and German without translation are also off-putting. The Word serious of commentaries fall into this vein; though the commentary on John by my late friend George Beasley Murray is very good (though still technical and filled with unnecessary academic references).

The usefulness of some unorthodox works

From time to time a book, or a series of books, is published that are from a questionable author or from a compromised publishing house; this means that there are sections in the work that are unbiblical or that contradict sound theology, or are based on wrong assumptions. However, they may have great value in having a horde of useful technical information. Such books include studies on Bible history, general history, Bible customs and manners, word studies and so forth.

Examples: the semi-liberal, Anglican, *Clarendon Bible series* on OT books published in Oxford³ are not a first choice for information on the OT but can be helpful if you have nothing else. Good quality hardbacks are often found cheap second-hand⁴ and, for a poor student, these can give a good foundation if read with discernment. The technical, historical information is of good quality, written by professors, but comments on miracles and Biblical authorship are compromised. The original *Expositor's Bible*, from a similar stable, are found very cheap and provide useful information. The occasional one is actually very good, such as those by Blaikie, Findlay or Kellogg;⁵ but all must be read with care.

As long as the reader is theologically aware enough not to be affected by the errors, these books can be helpful and they are often found cheaply. Some of the best linguistic studies, Bible dictionaries and other technical resources originate outside the Reformed stable. Some standard works (such as *Bullinger's Critical Lexicon*, *Vincent's Word Studies* and *Vine's Expository Dictionary* are from Dispensational and Arminian writers. Other famous linguistic sources are partly of liberal origins (e.g. *Theological Dict. of the NT*, ed. G Bromiley; *The Dict. of NT Theology*, ed. C Brown and the *BDB Gesenius Hebrew Lexicon*).

Be discerning.

Example one

Take the complex book of Revelation. There are hundreds of commentaries on this important book and these are often found in second-hand bookstores, so you need to weed out that which is pointless; it would take a lifetime to read them all. Now, presuming that you are of amillennial Reformed persuasion, you will need to sift out those that take different views.⁶

³ *The Decline and Fall of the Hebrew Kingdoms* (1926 Robinson). *Israel after the Exile* (1928 Lofthouse). *From Moses to Elisha: Israel to the end of the ninth century* (1929 Elliott-Binns). *Judaism in the Greek Period, from the Rise of Alexander the Great to the Intervention of Rome, 333-63 B.C.* (1932 Box). *The History and Religion of Israel* (1936 Wardle, Hippisley). *In the Beginning* (1947 Hooke).

⁴ A friend bought one this very week for £3.50.

⁵ In fact many of these are re-published today at high prices.

⁶ If you want to educate yourself on the other views, and this is useful, a short way to do this is to read '*The Meaning of the Millennium*', ed. RG Clouse, which takes four views with interactive comments of each contributor.

Many of those teaching a Dispensational view (mostly pre-trib.) will be from Dispensational and Brethren publishing houses, so avoid those from Moody Press, Paternoster Press, Loizeaux Brothers, independent Brethren publishers and those from Dallas Seminary theologians. Bear in mind that other evangelical publishers will put out books by popular Dispensational authors, such as Zondervan publishing those by John Walvoord; MMS also published many of these.

Then you need to avoid historic premillennialism and postmillennialism, so make yourself aware of prominent authors in these fields; remember that the bibliography will help you identify these. Modern postmillennial writers include Reconstructionist Reformed men as well as Dominionist Charismatics; this is a wide field today.

Then when you have found some helpful, orthodox commentators, note the other helpful writers that they mention. So, while there are differences in details, the best commentaries on Revelation are: *'More Than Conquerors'*, W Hendriksen; *'Revelation Spiritually Understood'*, CD Alexander; *'The Book of Revelation'*, PE Hughes and *'Behold He Cometh'*, H Hoeksema. There are many other commentaries that contain much useful material on Revelation, but these few contain the best overall plan. This plan is that Revelation is a series of cyclic, parallel prophecies demonstrating the victory of Jesus over Satan during the history of the Gospel age, designed to encourage the Lord's people during affliction while drawing on OT idioms.

Now this is not blatant sectarianism; a student who wished to gain help in understanding this book from his overall theological perspective needs to know what to avoid. No end of confusion and damage is done by sincere people buying books that they thought were helpful but were from unorthodox stables. It can sometimes take years to unlearn some things mistakenly imbibed. Most people read a few authors on this subject, become completely confused by their contradictory statements, and then give up on the actual Biblical book of Revelation, consigning it to the 'impossible to understand bin'. Yet God himself tells us that a blessing accompanies those who read this book. We need a sensible approach.

Example two

I am in a second-hand bookshop looking for a commentary on the books of the NT. There are many on the shelves, but I do not know the value of them.

First, avoid all those commentaries which come from suspect or liberal publishing houses. Thus all the liberal books by SCM or SPCK (which are common) can be ignored. Also avoid all the cheap, non-academic paperbacks from publishers which focus on Charismatic and Higher Life works, such as Kingsway.

Then avoid all those whom you know are written by heretics or that are endorsed by heretics on the cover or in the foreword.

Then check the forewords and covers for signs that they are well supported or look useful. Are they endorsed by good men?

Then look at the bibliography, what sort of books are listed? Are many evangelical and Reformed books mentioned? Is the list full of liberal references? Look at the footnotes; are the evangelical writers quoted supported or derided.

Look at the biography summary of the author on the covers or introduction. Is he from a sound seminary or a dodgy one? Is he from a Reformed denomination or an Arminian / Dispensational one.

Then read the preface and the contents. Does the author centre on Christ? Is he focused on the truth? Does he preach a Biblical Gospel?

By these tests one can get a general opinion of whether an unknown author is relatively safe or not.

If the book is published by a house that usually prints sound books; is endorsed by a sound theologian; is filled with sound references in the bibliography; appears (from the preface and contents) to centre on Christ and the truth, and the writer appears to be from a good background in the biography – then the chances are that the book may be OK. It still may not be, but you have done all you can to check at this point.

Conclusion

Just because a book comes from a person calling himself an evangelical, and is published by a 'Christian' publishing house, it does not mean that it will be full of truth. In fact, very many 'Christian' books published today are actually full of errors. Even books by claimed Calvinists are often full of errors, being based upon a false theological system (such as Dispensationalism, Common Grace, Hyper Calvinism, Antinomianism or Amyraldism).

For example, John MacArthur has written many helpful books and is highly esteemed in the Calvinist world, especially in America. Yet this man is extremely confused on the doctrines of grace, especially wavering on limited atonement and election (he has written a book claiming that God loves everybody). He is free offer and Amyraldian on the Gospel presentation. For decades he held a heretical view of the eternal generation of Christ (and this is still available in his printed works). He holds to Common Grace. But worst of all he is a staunch Dispensationalist and fails to see that this is incompatible with Calvinism. Thus his famous study Bible, though containing much helpful technical information (written by others) is loaded with dangerous themes and will do untold damage to the young and weak believer - despite his claims of being Reformed. This famous 'Calvinist' is not Reformed in the traditional sense of the word at all; he contradicts Calvin and veers away from the position of the confessions.

This means that old books are often of much more value to the Bible student, and much safer. But this provokes a problem; how does the Bible student know what to buy? I hope that this simple paper has provided some help in answering this question.

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