

The Top Ten

My Ten Favorite Books For Ministry And Study

If you were stranded on a desert island, and you could only have three items, what would those three items be? Questions like these are often used as fun party starters or introductions at business gatherings. People often answer with such responses as food, water, television, a girlfriend, etc.

Such a question makes a person personalize the thought to his or her own context. As I look at such a question, I am sitting in my office with my bookshelves behind me. This setting makes me think: if I were stranded on a desert island and could only take a few books with me, what would I take? We live in an age of unparalleled access to literature and tools for preaching, teaching, counseling, writing, and personal growth. I myself have over two thousand such tools. This is, for some, a massive library. For others, it is quite modest, if not tiny.

Yet, when one boils ministry down to its essential parts, what books really “do the trick?” What books have I used on a regular basis that I would recommend to a pastor that asks “What books do I most need for ministry?” Now, as soon as I say “need,” some will object that there is a big difference between need and want. We need the Bible to do ministry, we want books to help us use the Bible. That is absolutely true.

Yet the Apostle Paul thought it necessary to include in Holy Scripture a plea to Timothy to bring him his scrolls and books while he was in prison.¹ Books are tools that God has allowed His servants to use. Next to the Holy Spirit, books are a pastor’s greatest teachers in understanding the Bible. It was Martin Luther who once wrote “There never yet have been, nor are there now, too many good books.”ⁱⁱ

All that being said, I have included in the following list the ten books I believe all pastors, teachers, and committed laymen should read and use in the understanding and doing of ministry. These are the books I would want on a desert island!

1. The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Version

Ryrie, Charles C. *The Ryrie Study Bible: New American Standard Version*. Moody Publishers, 2010

I appreciate both the translation, as it is arguably the most literal available, and the stance of the author. The notes and articles provide a systematic, dispensational approach to understanding the Word of God. In addition to summary notes throughout the biblical text, the Ryrie Study Bible provides the

reader with very helpful summaries of doctrine, Church history, and Christian living.

2. The UBS Greek New Testament: A Reader’s Edition

Aland, Barbara. Ed. *The UBS Greek New Testament: A Reader’s Edition*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2007

Though not a tool for everyone, a good Greek New Testament is gold in the hands of a person who can use it with humility and ability. It is a tool to see the New Testament as originally written and it provides the reader with significant additional insight into an author’s literary structure.

3. The Moody Handbook of Theology: Revised and Expanded

Enns, Paul. *The Moody Handbook of Theology: Revised and Expanded*. Moody Publishers, 2008

This is an excellent survey of theology. It covers, in a simple yet not simplistic way, the major theological disciplines, namely biblical theology, systematic theology, historical theology, dogmatic theology, and contemporary theology. Not only does the author provide an evangelical, dispensational approach, but the summaries are accurate and helpful.

4. Christian Theology

Erikson, Millard J. *Christian Theology: 2nd Edition*. Baker, 2008

This is an example of a book in which one can disagree with some of an author’s view while still appreciating the general stance and approach. There is much to appreciate about this systematic theology, such as its in-depth introduction, its generally conservative theological position, and its thorough and accurate treatment of biblical texts. Though one might disagree on some issues, such as Dr. Erikson’s stance on creation and presuppositionalism, this is an excellent overview of theology.

5. MacArthur Bible Commentary

MacArthur, John F. *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*. Thomas Nelson, 2005

Dr. MacArthur has been long known for his expositional, evangelical, conservative approach to Scripture. This commentary provides an adequate survey of the Bible. While providing insight to well known passages of Scripture, it does not skip over more challenging texts, but rather deals with them in a confident, exegetical way. Though the reader may disagree with some of the conclusions and exegetical

decisions on the part of the author, one cannot deny the vast value of such a one volume resource.

6. Zondervan's Pictorial Bible Dictionary

Tenney, Merrill C. Ed. *Zondervan's Pictorial Bible Dictionary*. Zondervan, 1988

As a person new to the faith, this book was a gift to me from a pastor friend and it has proved to be invaluable. It provides excellent, comprehensive summaries of biblical themes, characters, places, and books. It is evangelical and conservative and it will answer for the reader many basic questions a preacher or student of the Bible will need to know.

7. Christianity Through The Centuries: Expanded Third Edition

Cairns, Earle. *Christianity Through The Centuries: 3rd Edition*. Zondervan, 1996

People have said "Protestants know their Bibles, Catholics know their history." That is both a wonderful and sad truth. All believers should have a basic knowledge of Church history to appreciate God's work in others over time and to avoid being naive in current trends. After all, Solomon once wrote that there "is nothing new under the sun."ⁱⁱⁱ This book provides just that. It avoids unnecessary technical language while still providing the reader with a comprehensive survey of major events and theological issues and developments over time. The reader will walk away with a foundational knowledge of God's work since the time of Christ and be able to apply such knowledge to life and ministry.

8. Christ-Centered Preaching: Second Edition

Chapell, Bryan. *Christ-Centered Preaching: 2nd Edition*. Baker, 2005

This book changed the way I do preaching. The basic premise is that much of preaching has become self-help moralism rather than Gospel-empowered, Holy Spirit driven, exposition of the Word. Though the book is a great overview of the mechanics of preaching, its true benefit is the way it handles the problems of sin and self-righteousness. Dr. Chapell suggests that the preacher identify the fallen condition focus of every text. This is the human condition that connects both the biblical characters and the contemporary hearers. It is the struggle that we all face to which only the substitutionary death and resurrection of Jesus is the answer. This approach roots change and growth in the Gospel. While the book screams for a dispensational understanding of Christ and redemption (it is written from a Reformed perspective) there is so much of value in this book that one can benefit.

9. The Gospel and Personal Evangelism

Dever, Mark. *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism*. Good News and Crossway, 2007

This is an excellent summary of the Gospel, our mission as New Testament Churches, and methods of personal evangelism. Its greatest value is in recognizing what is and is not the responsibility of believers in sharing their faith. It upholds the sovereignty of God and denounces man-centered approaches to manipulating people. Yet, it also emphasizes the duty and privilege of Christians to be used by God to impact the lives of others.

10. Instruments In The Redeemer's Hands: People In Need Of Change Helping People In Need Of Change

Tripp, Paul David. *Instruments In The Redeemer's Hands: People In Need Of Change Helping People In Need Of Change*. P and R Publishing, 2002

This book changed the way I work with people in personal ministry. In a word, it is about discipleship. But far from simply handing out a program of "do this and don't do this," Dr. Tripp provides a way of looking at people through the lens of God's Word that connects human frailty and sinfulness to the Gospel of God and connects people to one another as God's tools. The book does, however, provide methods and helps in loving and knowing people, as well as speaking truth into their lives and walking through obedience with them. Yet God, specifically as revealed in the person and work of Jesus, remains the ultimate goal and prize of redemption and calls us to be useful servants.

Obviously, other books could make such a list, depending on the one compiling the list. These are the books I have found helpful in forming my understanding of God, His Word, and His people. I hope that this list can be a resource for you as well.

It should be stated: good books do not replace the Word of God, but drive one to it as the life giving source of strength. The writer of Hebrews states "For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."^{iv} Bible students have the responsibility not to let good books become an end all, but rather a means to an end. "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth."^v

ⁱ 2 Timothy 3:11

ⁱⁱ Written Source Unknown

ⁱⁱⁱ Ecclesiastes 1:9 NAU

^{iv} Hebrews 4:12 NAU

^v 2 Timothy 2:15 NAU