

Mining For Gold

What I've Learned from Reading Christian Biographies

Steven J. Cole

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During a class in my final year in seminary, Dr. Howard Hendricks said something that jumped out and grabbed me for life: "Two factors will have the greatest impact on where you find yourself ten years from now: the books you read and the friends you make. Guard them both very carefully!"

That was many years ago. I got to thinking about what, apart from the Bible, has most influenced my Christian life. I concluded that it is reading Christian biographies—the lives of the saints, as some call it. The people I have read about have become my friends, even though I won't meet them personally until I get to heaven. Hendricks was right: the friends I have made through the books I have read have had a profound impact on my life.

It's a gold mine available to all but mined by few. The pressures of our fast-lane lives crowd out the time for settling down with the greats of the past. What can they teach me about the problems I face? Plenty! I've found that the mine is rich and worth the effort many times over. Here are four ways that reading Christian biographies has helped me:

HERITAGE: Christian biographies give me a sense of my place in the Christian drama.

Reading Christian biographies has helped me appreciate my spiritual roots. It helps me put our times and my particular circumstances in perspective. It makes me realize that I am carrying the torch handed to me by those who went before, and that I must hand it off intact to those who come after me.

For example, we live in a culture that values tolerance and open-mindedness. Many Christians tiptoe around difficult issues like sexual ethics, divorce, or hell. Reading the lives of Luther and Calvin and how they stood fearlessly for the truth in their day gives me courage to take a stand on the issues that really matter.

I'm not deluded into thinking that my convictions and choices will influence history as the Reformers did. But I do believe that taking a stand on the common issues of everyday life in my small corner of the vineyard matters in shaping God's kingdom in our day.

One small example: Some years ago, four or five disgruntled marriage partners came to me, independently of one another, and informed me that they were going to divorce their mates. When I inquired why, I discovered that in each case the unhappy mate had read a popular book by a Christian psychologist that encouraged them to issue an ultimatum in an attempt to bring their partners to repentance. But in my judgment, none of the situations, although difficult, were beyond hope if the partners were willing to forgive and live in a godly manner with their sinning mates.

In spite of intense pressure from some friends of the wounded parties to go along with this popular book, I gently, but firmly, held to the biblical high view of the sanctity of marriage. In each case the unhappy spouse followed my counsel. As far as I know, even the marriages where there was sexual infidelity are still intact today. My commitment to hold to the Word in the face of strong cultural currents to the contrary preserved several families from destruction.

I realize it's not on a par with Luther at the Diet of Worms, but it helps me to stand firm when I feel pressured to compromise to know that I am linked in an unbroken chain of faithful witnesses who have held to God's unchanging truth before me.

MODELING: Christian biographies give me great examples to follow.

Dr. Albert Schweitzer was asked what is the best way to raise children. The learned doctor replied, "There are three ways: 1) By example, 2) By example, and 3) By example." He was right. God has made us so that from our earliest days, we learn from models.

The same is true spiritually. We learn by watching models who "flesh out" Christian principles in their daily lives. When I was younger in the faith, I wanted someone to disciple me. I tried several different men, but it never seemed to work out the way I had hoped. But in a very real sense, I have been discipled by some of the greatest Christians who have ever lived, by reading their biographies.

Three who have influenced me greatly are Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Charles Spurgeon, and Jonathan Edwards. Lloyd-Jones is from the 20th century, Spurgeon from the 19th, and Edwards from the 18th. All three were pastors and strong preachers. Their ministries affirm the power of biblical preaching backed by godly lives. As a pastor, they especially speak to me.

But those not in pastoral ministry can gain much from these giants. They all combined solid theology with deep devotion for Christ. Their theology gave them the mooring they needed to stand firm in the controversies of their day. Reading their lives motivates me to deepen my roots by chewing on some of the great books from the past rather than just nibbling on the latest best-selling fluff.

Besides Lloyd-Jones, Spurgeon, and Edwards, I have many more models. Francis Schaeffer has reinforced the need to blend compassion with truth, scholarship with evangelism, and orthodoxy with spiritual reality. George Muller impresses me with the practicality of a life of prayer and faith. Hudson Taylor, Jim Elliot, and Bruce Olson all bucked the Christian establishment and endured hardships to further God's work in difficult areas. Adoniram Judson's faithful endurance through horrible trials and discouragements inspires me.

SPIRITUALITY AND DOCTRINE: Christian biographies give me theological perspective and balance.

We are all limited by the fact that we are creatures of our time and culture. We tend to view issues from the grid we almost unconsciously absorb from the theological and social climate in which we come to Christ and begin to grow. It's as if we're born in the forest and start walking, not quite sure where all the various trails come from or lead to. Reading Christian biographies is like climbing a high mountain so that you can get a feel for the lay of the land.

Reading biographies of men and women who grew up in different times under different cultural influences, broadens me. To read of Christians from various traditions who loved and served the same Lord widens my understanding of what God is doing. It makes me less sectarian, less consumed with petty issues and narrow viewpoints.

It also gives me perspective on how the Christianity of our day has drifted. For example, take the matter of the Lord's Day. In our day, especially in laid-back California, most Christians view Sunday the same as any other day, except that you go to church if you're not doing something else. But after church, it's a day to do whatever you please: Wash your car, work in your yard, go shop-

ping, play soccer, watch TV sports, or whatever. We've lost any concept of Sunday as the Lord's Day.

Reading the life of Hudson Taylor, I was shocked to learn that his wife, Maria, who was desperately trying to get home to be with a sick child, would not travel on "the sabbath" (Sunday). I don't necessarily agree with her. My point is that by reading about people from the past I've learned that "we've come a long way, baby!" Maybe we are out of balance. That drives me back to the Scriptures to seek God's mind on the matter.

You gain the same kind of perspective on other social issues. For example, what did Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, Robertson Nicoll, G. Campbell Morgan, C. S. Lewis, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones all have in common? They smoked, some of them as pastors! In most American Christian circles, that's enough to brand you as unspiritual, if not to question your salvation. And yet Spurgeon would be aghast that Christians watch TV and go to the movies. He disapproved of attending stage plays and reading secular novels. Such "worldliness" was unthinkable in his day!

Besides social issues, reading the lives of the saints gives perspective on theological issues. Many of the current "hot topics" are not new. Calvin has some great insights on self-love. Lloyd-Jones shows how the "lordship salvation" debate was hashed out over 200 years ago.

So reading Christian biographies has taken me up the mountain for a clearer view of my own and others' theological perspective. This has helped me sort through which issues are crucial and worth fighting for and which issues are more cultural, where I need to be more tolerant.

HUMANITY: Christian biographies give me an understanding of people and of myself.

There are two types of Christian biographies. Many of the older works fall into what I would call the "eulogy" genre, approaching the subject as we deal with the deceased at funerals: They emphasize his good points and overlook his faults. More recent biographers tend to take a more honest look at their subjects, exposing warts and all.

If you read more honest biographies (and read between the lines of the eulogy-type), you discover that God has used some very rough instruments. You find that the great strengths of some of the giants were also the flip side of great weaknesses and blind spots. Men and women who were unswerving in their commitment to Christ were sometimes stubborn and ran roughshod over people. And yet God used them greatly!

This is not to excuse their sins, nor to excuse my own. But I am a perfectionist. I tend to be very hard on myself and on others. When I read of those who did great things for God, it helps me to realize that they weren't perfect. Far from it!

Some of the greats, such as John Wesley and William Carey, had difficult marriages. Carey's wife didn't want to go to the mission field. When she finally got there (due to her husband's pressure), she went insane. David Livingstone was a loner who had numerous conflicts with fellow workers. He essentially abandoned his wife and children, who suffered greatly without him. Yet God used Livingstone to open Africa to the gospel!

Bob Pierce loved the world but couldn't relate to his own family. He preached the gospel to huge crowds in the Far East and saw thousands respond. He founded World Vision to help the many hurting children he encountered. Yet his oldest daughter committed suicide. He and his wife were separated at several points in their marriage, apart from the numerous separations due to his incredible travel schedule—he was gone an average of ten months each year! He never tamed his

explosive temper, and eventually World Vision fired him. Yet he loved and served the Lord to the end of his life.

C. T. Studd, famous for the quote, “If Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for Him,” left his wife in poor health and went to Africa, returning to see her only once in the final 16 years of her life. He worked 18-hour days and expected everyone else to do likewise. His intense dedication to the cause of Christ made him intolerant of anyone who wasn’t equally committed. He alienated everyone around him, including his daughter and son-in-law, and was finally dismissed by the mission he had founded.

My point is not to take pot shots at these servants of the Lord nor, by justifying their sin, to excuse my own. But seeing their shortcomings and failures helps me accept imperfect people, including myself.

God did some significant things with these imperfect men and women. Thousands of lives have been changed. In some cases, the history of nations and of western civilization has been altered through these godly, yet very human, instruments. Maybe there’s hope that God can use even me!

CONCLUSION

W. Robertson Nicoll, the learned British writer, had 25,000 volumes in his personal library, including 5,000 biographies. He wrote, “I have for years read every biography I could lay my hands on, and not one has failed to teach me something” (cited by Warren Wiersbe, *Walking With the Giants* [Baker], p. 108).

I agree (although I’m a bit short of 5,000)! Many of the greats from the past have become my mentors and friends as I’ve read their biographies. They have given me a sense of the heritage I have in Christ. They have provided me with models to live by. They have given me theological and spiritual perspective to navigate the tricky waters of our times. They have helped me understand others and myself, as imperfect human beings called to serve the perfect Savior. The gold is there for the mining. Happy prospecting!