



SOUTHWESTERN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

THEOLOGY AND READING

VIRTUE OF READING

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Seminaries are in the business of planting seeds and watering seedlings. The term “seminary” literally means “seed bed” and is derived from the Latin word *seminarium*.¹ Although the imagery behind the term itself has slipped from the minds of many, it remains an apropos reminder of the tasks that lay before both students and professors. The hope is that the knowledge, skills, and virtues nurtured throughout a seminary education will take root in the hearts and minds of the next generation of church leaders and bear fruit for a lifetime of ministry. This particular issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* is dedicated to an investigation and exemplification of the virtue of reading.

This article will extol the virtue of reading by answering two foundational questions: (1) Why read outside Scripture? and (2) What should be read outside Scripture?

A grand assumption underlies this article and must be made explicit at this point. So important is this assumption that it will be stated here rather than in a footnote where such items are typically handled. It is assumed that those reading this article understand that the most important reading ever done by anyone is the reading of Scripture. The Bible is the inerrant word of God and the only foundation for right thinking and living. It is further assumed that the discipline of regular Bible reading is in place and that the types of reading advocated throughout the balance of this article are in addition to and not a replacement for the reading of Scripture.

Why Read Outside Scripture?

Since the Reformation, Protestants of different stripes have championed the clarion call, “*sola Scriptura*.” Over time, this dedication to the

¹Philip Babcock Gove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield: G. & C. Merriam, 1966), s.v. “seminary.”

Scriptures became for some an abandonment of everything except the Scriptures and a distinction between *sola Scriptura* and *nuda Scriptura* became necessary.² Timothy George well characterizes this distinction as follows, “For evangelicals the principle of *sola Scriptura* means that all the teachings, interpretations, and traditions of the church must be subjected to the divine touchstone of Holy Scripture itself. But *sola Scriptura* is not *nuda Scriptura*. . . . The consensus of thoughtful Christian interpretation of the Word down the ages (and on most matters of importance there is such a thing) is not likely to be wrong, and evangelicals, no less than other Christians, have much to learn from the church fathers, schoolmen, and theologians of ages past.”³

Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has itself for more than one hundred years, advocated *sola Scriptura* over *nuda Scriptura*. Evidence for this can be found in the degree requirements and course descriptions dating back to the seminary’s founding in 1908. At that time, the staple degrees were the Bachelor and Master of Theology, requiring a foundation in Scripture and the original languages (16 courses), theological studies (12 courses) and practical application (7 courses).⁴ Textbooks for these courses covered a wide spectrum of reading, including the Hebrew Old Testament, the Greek New Testament, Joseph Henry Thayer’s *Lexicon of New Testament Greek*, some works of Josephus, A.H. Newman’s *A Manual of Church History*, Adolf von Harnack’s *History of Doctrines*, and A.H. Strong’s *Systematic Theology*.⁵

Given the distinction between *sola Scriptura* and *nuda Scriptura* within the evangelical movement and the pursuit of a broad spectrum of reading at Southwestern throughout its history, the remainder of this section will present seven reasons why seminary students, alumni, and professors ought to read widely outside Scripture.

First, some passages of Scripture present the reader with cultural referents that would have been easily understood among the original readership, but that escape the modern mind due to cultural estrangement. One such type of occurrence is the reference to monetary values. For in-

²The tension between *sola Scriptura* and *nuda Scriptura* is a subset of the two thousand year old struggle between Christianity and culture. For a detailed treatment of this broader debate, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

³Timothy George, “Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology,” in *Catholics and Evangelicals: Do They Share a Common Future?*, ed. Thomas P. Rausch (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 140. James Leo Garrett, Jr., distinguished Southwestern theologian, similarly argues for *suprema scriptura*. *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2 vol. 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills: BIBAL, 2000, 2001).

⁴*First Annual Catalogue of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary* (Waco, 1908), 15.

⁵*Ibid.*, 16–26.

stance, properly interpreting the actions of the forgiven slave in Matthew 18:21–35 requires a comparison of the sums “ten thousand talents” and “a hundred denarii.”⁶ Knowing that a single talent represents approximately 6,000 denarii and that one denarius represents approximately a day’s wage enables the modern reader to appreciate the depth of the king’s forgiveness and the recalcitrance of the forgiven slave.⁷ The slave who had just been forgiven 60 million denarii physically assaulted a fellow slave over only 100 denarii. Other types of cultural references that make extrabiblical reading important include measurements, the nature of Ancient Near Eastern genealogies, and the flora, fauna, geography, customs, and politics. A proper understanding of each of these areas enables the reader to interpret Scripture accurately.

Second, related to the issue of cultural estrangement is cultural entrenchment. The reader who is culturally *estranged* from biblical times encounters unusual ideas and recognizes them as such. The reader who is culturally *entrenched* is in the far more dangerous position of reading a passage of Scripture, seeing an idea or word that looks familiar and then assuming that the modern expression of that idea is the same as the ancient expression. Take as examples the nature of marriage and adoption in biblical times. Although each bears resemblance to the contemporary Western expression of these customs, there were elements present in the culture of biblical times that must be considered when interpreting passages where these customs occur. In the case of marriage, there is the betrothal period.⁸ In the case of adoption, it occurred more frequently than in modern times, was not limited to children, and involved the cancelling of the adoptee’s debts.⁹

The danger of cultural entrenchment as it relates to the understanding of language has been addressed throughout the history of Western philosophy. Although it has most recently been discussed among postmodern thinkers, this idea can also be found in earlier thinkers, like seventeenth century philosopher, Baruch Spinoza. He writes:

Each person will turn from one thought to another according to the manner in which the habit of each has arranged the images of things in the body. The soldier, for instance, if he sees the footsteps of a horse in the sand, will immediately turn from

⁶Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible (NASB).

⁷Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 85.

⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

⁹*Ibid.*, 62.

the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and so to the thought of war. The countryman, on the other hand, from the thought of a horse will turn to the thought of his plough, his field, &c.; and thus each person will turn from one thought to this or that thought, according to the manner in which he has been accustomed to connect and bind together the images of things in his mind.¹⁰

Spinoza correctly notes the tendency for the mind to turn first to those things with which it is most familiar. Christians must guard against dangers of cultural entrenchment when reading Scripture. One solution to this problem is to read widely and outside one's immediate context. C.S. Lewis addressed the value of broad reading to combat the problems of cultural estrangement and entrenchment when he wrote, "A man who has lived in many places is not likely to be deceived by the local errors of his native village: the scholar has lived in many times and is therefore in some degree immune from the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his own age."¹¹

Third, in the almost two thousand years since the close of the canon, the church has wrestled through numerous theological issues of primary importance. Ignoring the sacrifice and work of those who have gone before will open the door for the church of the future to repeat the errors of the past. Particularly worthy of consideration are the first four ecumenical councils. The statements produced by these councils represent the culmination of 450 years of effort directed toward the proper articulation of Christology and the Trinity. Some of the heresies condemned by these councils are still present among sectarian groups today.¹² Examples include the Arian tendencies of the Jehovah's Witnesses and deprecation of the deity of Christ among the Unitarian Church.¹³ Reading widely from the history of the church provides the student of Scripture with a wealth of counsel from those who have gone before. The Scripture itself reminds readers that wise counsel is to be esteemed, "Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Prov 11:14).

¹⁰Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* 2.18, trans. W.H. White, in vol. 31 of *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 382.

¹¹C.S. Lewis, "Learning in Wartime," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 51.

¹²For a survey of heresies among sects in the United States, see George W. Braswell, Jr., *Understanding Sectarian Groups in America* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994).

¹³*Ibid.*, 69, 112.

Fourth, all truth is God's truth. Augustine is typically credited as one of the earliest Christian thinkers to advance the notion that truth, wherever it is found, is worthy of consideration. He writes,

Whatever has been rightly said by the heathen, we must appropriate to our uses. . . . [A]ll branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil, which every one of us, when going out under the leadership of Christ from the fellowship of the heathen, ought to abhor and avoid; but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regard even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence which are everywhere scattered abroad.¹⁴

The great writings of the Western world are worthy of critical consumption by the Christian mind for the many places where they contain philosophical, historical, mathematical, scientific, and other truths. However, although Christians should be encouraged to seek truth in all spheres of knowledge, it is important to remember that Scripture is the only source of inerrant knowledge. In the tradition of the medieval theologians, the contemporary thinker ought to be able to affirm theology as the "Queen of the Sciences" due to the fact that it rests on the only sure source of truth.¹⁵

Fifth, Christians are expected to communicate the truth of God's Word to a diverse and rapidly changing world. The gospel is not reserved for certain cultures, but a treasure to be proclaimed to all nations. The Lord gave the global scope of the gospel in the Great Commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19–20). Paul notes the implications of a gospel for all nations when he argues for the importance of cultural relevance in 1 Corinthians 9:19–22:

¹⁴Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II.xl.60–61, trans. J. F. Shaw, in vol. 18 of *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 655–56.

¹⁵For Aquinas' articulation of the supremacy of theology over the other sciences see Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* I.Q.I.Art.5, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd ed., rev. (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1920), 7.

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more. To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win the Jews; to those under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

Whether preparing for overseas missions or ministry in the local church, the student of Scripture is called to present the truth of God's Word with cultural relevance. This relevance is impossible to achieve without reading deeply in Scripture and widely in both one's own culture and the culture in which one ministers.¹⁶

Sixth, the work of apologetics is not possible unless the Christian thoroughly understands opposing positions. Peter writes, "but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet 3:15). The word for "defense" in this passage is *απολογία*; it can also be translated "argument" or "explanation" and is the basis for the English word "apologetics." Christians are expected to respond to those who have questions about the faith. Reading broadly in the areas of religion, philosophy, science, mathematics, and literature provides the believer with an understanding of those disciplines that makes defending and arguing for the faith possible. The work of Bill Dembski, Southwestern's Research Professor of Philosophy, well demonstrates the effectiveness of the application of study in mathematics and philosophy to the work of apologetics.¹⁷ The Intelligent Design movement has made great strides in defending the faith in both the academy and in popular culture.¹⁸

¹⁶It is important to note that cultural relevance is not achieved merely by living within the Christian sub-culture of one's immediate context. The further a culture drifts from a Christian worldview, the more diligent Christians need to be to understand the culture around it.

¹⁷For an introduction to the Intelligent Design movement see William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999).

¹⁸The Intelligent Design movement and other approaches to science that challenge the *status quo* impacted popular culture in the motion picture *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* (Premise Media and Rampant Films, 2008).

Seventh, the Bible esteems education. The Scriptures provide a positive view of the education of a number of key leaders in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Daniel and his friends underwent three years of Babylonian education. The result of this education is given in Daniel 1:17–20,

As for these four youths, God gave them knowledge and intelligence in every branch of literature and wisdom; Daniel even understood all kinds of visions and dreams. Then at the end of the days which the king had specified for presenting them, the commander of the officials presented them before Nebuchadnezzar. The king talked with them, and out of them all not one was found like Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king's personal service. As for every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king consulted them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and conjurers who were in all his realm.

It is significant to note that both man's responsibility to teach and learn and God's role in the provision of knowledge and intelligence are held in harmony in this text. The education of these four youths was used by God to place them in key cultural and political positions where their understanding is used, but where it ultimately becomes secondary to God's supernatural provision of the interpretation of dreams and signs, protection in the fiery furnace, and the lion's den.

In the New Testament, Paul's education under the preeminent rabbi Gamaliel is documented in Acts 22:3. Although this education was conducted within a Hebrew setting, it appears from Paul's ministry to the gentiles that he was well versed in matters of Greek philosophy and poetry as well. The *locus classicus* for this facet of Paul's ministry is Acts 17:16–34, where he engages the Athenian philosophers in the midst of the Areopagus. He employs both false religion and the poetry of the gentiles as a background to present the truth of the gospel. Paul also makes use of Greek poetry to communicate truth in 1 Corinthians 12:32–33 and Titus 1:12–13. In each case it is significant that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of these texts to include this use of secular sources in the communication of inerrant truth.

What Should Be Read Outside Scripture?

Having briefly presented seven reasons for reading outside Scripture, this article now turns to a presentation of the value of different types of

literature. An initial discussion will argue for the benefits of reading both literature with which one agrees and literature with which one disagrees. This will be followed by an investigation into the value of reading biographies and fiction.

It is important for those young in the faith to begin by primarily reading Scripture and literature that is consistent with the biblical witness. Apart from a firm grounding in the Word, such spiritual babes are at best incapable of critically reading unbiblical works and at worst will be led astray by them. However, it is not just those new to the faith who ought to read praiseworthy literature. Paul's injunction in Philippians 4:8 is for all believers, "Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things." All believers should certainly develop a disciplined reading of literature that magnifies rather than detracts from the glory of God.

For those who are spiritually mature, however, a second discipline of critically reading works that are opposed to one's convictions is also beneficial for two reasons. First, one cannot know for certain what should or should not be read until he reads it for himself. This approach is consistent with the New Testament notion of the priesthood of all believers.¹⁹ Second, it is praiseworthy for Christians to evaluate ideas critically in light of God's Word. The Bereans were "noble-minded" when they received Paul's teaching and then daily compared his teaching to the Scriptures.²⁰ To read only those books approved by Institution X, Pastor Y, or Denomination Z abdicates individual responsibility.

Those interested in the discipline of reading outside one's convictions should be encouraged to consider two medieval Christian works, Abelard's *Sic et Non* and Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. Each of these works in its own way contributed to the advancement of the notion of a well-rounded Christian mind. *Sic et Non* is properly translated *Yes and No*. In this work, Abelard quotes the church fathers on 158 topics, showing that there was not unanimity among them on all issues.²¹ On any given issue some fathers said, "Yes," and others said, "No." Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* presents the breadth of systematic theology following a method that exposes the reader to a variety of viewpoints on every subject covered. In each case, Aquinas follows the same basic model. He first poses a question for inquiry. The very first question in the entire work is, "Whether, besides philosophy, any

¹⁹See Peter's argument for the priesthood of believers in 1 Pet 2:4–10.

²⁰See Luke's affirmation of the Bereans in Acts 17:11.

²¹Peter Abelard, *Sic et Non* (circa 1100).

further doctrine is required?”²² He then proceeds to raise objections to an affirmative answer to the question. After presenting the objections he then gives a statement to the contrary, his own reply, and then a reply to the first objections raised. By following this model, Aquinas opens the reader’s mind to the Scriptures, church fathers, and philosophers and this allows him to make his own decision regarding the matter under consideration.

For the contemporary reader interested in a variety of viewpoints on matters of doctrine, there are a number of books written that present opposing views on theological issues. Many times the titles of such works begin as follows, “*Four Views on . . .*” or “*Perspectives on . . .*”²³ The format for these works typically provides the reader with one contributor’s view followed by a rebuttal from the other contributors. These works provide a firm starting point for theological investigation by students, alumni, and scholars alike and seem to fit well with Proverbs 18:17, “The first to plead his case *seems* right, *Until* another comes and examines him.”

In addition to theological works of varying viewpoints, those interested in developing the discipline of reading would benefit from some of the great biographies of the Western world. Autobiographies written by great Christian thinkers in particular afford the reader a unique opportunity to fellowship with those who have gone before. In his *Confessions*, Augustine reminds readers that God’s grace truly overcomes a multitude of sins. For instance, Book II chronicles this great Christian thinker’s adolescent struggle with lust and lawlessness, two issues that continue to plague the youth of today. Augustine writes,

The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love’s serenity and lust’s darkness. Confusion of the two things boiled within me. It seized hold of my youthful weakness sweeping me through the precipitous rocks of desire to submerge me in a whirlpool of vice.²⁴

²²Aquinas, *Summa* I.Q.I.Art.1, 1–3. Aquinas’ answer to this first question might surprise modern Protestant readers. Here is his response, “*On the contrary*, It is written (2 Tim. iii. 16) : *All Scripture inspired of God is profitable to teach, to reprove, to correct, to instruct in justice*. Now Scripture, inspired of God, is no part of philosophical science, which has been built up by human reason. Therefore it is useful that besides philosophical science there should be other knowledge—*i.e.*, inspired of God. *I answer that*, It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God, besides philosophical science built up by human reason.”

²³Of particular interest might be the *Counterpoints* series published by Zondervan. Some of the topics covered in this series are miraculous gifts, hell, salvation in a pluralistic world, and sanctification.

²⁴Augustine, *Confessions* II.ii.2, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford, 1991),

On the issue of lawlessness he writes of his theft of a “huge load of pears,”

I wanted to carry out an act of theft and did so, driven by no kind of need other than my inner lack of any sense of, or feeling for, justice. Wickedness filled me. I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong.²⁵

Reading Augustine’s struggles reminds believers of the need to turn to God from the sinfulness common to all mankind and of God’s great power to redeem rebellious youth and convert them into giants of the faith.

Another classic biography which introduces the reader to the life and struggles of one of Christianity’s most influential leaders is Roland H. Bainton’s *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*.²⁶ From his vow to become a monk in 1505, after a run in with a bolt of lightning, to his posting of the 95 theses in Wittenberg to his stand at the Diet of Worms and beyond, this work leads readers on a journey through the life of the great reformer. Occasionally, Bainton provides Luther’s own words to tell his story. Perhaps of greatest importance is Luther’s own description of his “tower experience,” in which he discovers that justification is by faith. He writes,

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice of God,” because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God

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²⁵Ibid., II.iii.9, 29.

²⁶Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950).

justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven.²⁷

It is through the reading of biographies, like this one, that Christians can share in and come to appreciate some of the greatest moments in the history of the church.

The value of biographies extends into the modern era as well. C.S. Lewis’ autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, provides a window into the soul of one of the most influential Christians of the twentieth century.²⁸ In this work, Lewis provides the reader with the history of his pilgrimage through a number of competing worldviews and religions before finally converting to Christianity. The title is derived from the common thread of Lewis’ early life, the pursuit of “Joy.” Joy is for him is not mere happiness or pleasure, but *sensucht*, the deepest kind of longing for truth and meaning.²⁹ This great longing was for Lewis a kind of signpost pointing him in the right direction.³⁰ Although at times he searched for Joy in all the wrong places, it ultimately led him to Christ. Lewis’ personal story echoes that of other Christians throughout time who have found the path without Christ riddled with personal error in both thought and deed, but who in Christ are capable of communicating the truth of the gospel to all the world.

Beyond academic treatises and biographies, there is also value for the Christian in the realm of fiction. It is a common misconception that works of non-fiction speak of what is real while works of fiction speak of things unreal. This erroneous notion that reality is bound to the physical seems to be one of the tragic consequences of the Enlightenment and subsequent elevation of scientific knowledge.³¹ A Christian worldview embraces the notion that there are numerous entities outside the physical, including but not limited to: God, angelic beings, heaven, hell, and the whole domain of ideas. It is in these areas that fiction excels. Three examples from the rich

²⁷Ibid., 65.

²⁸C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

²⁹Ibid., 18.

³⁰Ibid., 238.

³¹For a brief survey of the history of Western thought see Francis Schaeffer’s *Escape from Reason*. He specifically addresses the deprecation of the non-physical in favor of the scientific on pages 36–38. Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1968).

heritage of Western literature will be selected to make this point.

The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan, originally published in 1678, is considered by some to be the second best-selling book of all time, trailing only behind the Bible itself in copies sold.³² This classic work of allegory contains approximately five hundred Scripture references noted by Bunyan in his original side notes and an additional eight hundred references identified by others.³³ Although the main character, Christian, never walked the physical pilgrimage described by Bunyan, Christians for two thousand years have trudged through their own "swamps of despondence," fought their own battles with Apollyon, had their fair share of encounters with those named "Ignorance," "Holdtheworld," and "Moneylove," and then crossed the river into the "Celestial City."

In his apology for *The Pilgrim's Progress* Bunyan provides several reasons why works of fiction are to be esteemed by Christians. First, he suggests that works of fiction can draw the lost to faith in Christ. He writes,

You see the ways the Fisher-man doth take
To catch the Fish; what Engines doth he make?
Behold how he engageth all his Wits;
Also his Snares, Lines, Angles, Hooks, and Nets:
Yet Fish there be, that neither Hook, nor Line,
Nor Snare, nor Net, nor Engine can make thine;
They must be grop't for, and be tickled too,
Or they will not be catch't, what e're you do.³⁴

Bunyan believes that stories are capable of communicating real truth, the truth of the gospel, through fiction. Second, he also argues that fiction is of value to believers. Bunyan writes,

Art thou for something rare, and profitable?
Wouldest thou see a Truth within a Fable?
Art thou forgetful? wouldest thou remember
From New-year's-day to the last of December?
Then read my fancies, they will stick like Burs,
And may be to the Helpless, Comforters.³⁵

³²John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress in Modern English*, trans. L. Edward Hazelbaker (North Brunswick: Bridge-Logos, 1998), 419.

³³Ibid., xii.

³⁴Ibid., xvii.

³⁵Ibid., xxi.

Finally, Bunyan's apology also argues for the validity of fiction on the basis of God's own communication to man through Scripture. He suggests that God used "Types, Shadows, and Metaphors" in the communication of truth in the Bible.³⁶ Addressing the imagery found in Scripture, Bunyan writes,

By Calves; and Sheep; by Heifers, and by Rams,
By Birds, and Herbs, and by the blood of Lambs,
God speaketh to him: And happy is he
That finds the light, and grace that in them be.³⁷

If God stooped down and communicated real ideas like sacrifice, love, justice, and atonement through the use of imagery, then it seems appropriate to Bunyan for Christians to do likewise.

Another example of the presentation of real ideas through fiction can be found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.³⁸ Recent degradations of Baron Frankenstein's monster in popular culture have led modern readers away from Shelley's original intentions for this masterpiece of Western literature. A return to the source reveals the piece to be a criticism of humanism. L. Russ Bush describes the novel as follows, "Baron Frankenstein uses the best hands, the best legs, and the best brain, and builds what he hopes will be the perfect man. . . . When normal human society refuses to love him because of his looks, the creature demands that Frankenstein make a female for him to love and to be loved by. When the request is refused, the monster murders one by one those whom Frankenstein loves. Finally, the man created by man murders his creator."³⁹ The story argues powerfully for the depravity of humanity and the very real idea that combining all the best parts of mankind will amount to nothing more than the destruction of those foolish enough to believe humanity can save itself.

In the twentieth century, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy stands as a monumental contribution to the development of modern literature. His works are considered by some to be the fountainhead of the contemporary fantasy genre.⁴⁰ While it may be difficult to perceive some of the Christian ideals subsumed within the symbolism of the story, there are many such ideas beneath the surface. Perhaps most obvious to the believer would be

³⁶Ibid., xviii.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818).

³⁹L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles, *Baptists and the Bible*, rev. and exp. (Nashville: Broadman, 1999), 168–69.

⁴⁰Douglas A. Anderson, ed., *Tales before Tolkien: The Roots of Modern Fantasy* (New York: Ballantine, 2003), 1–3.

the self-sacrificial love on the part of Gandalf before the Balrog and on the part of Samwise Gamgee in his service to Frodo in the bearing of the ring. Fortunately, Tolkien explained many of his thoughts about his fictional writings in the essay, "On Fairy-Stories."⁴¹ The balance of this section will present three ideas from this essay that demonstrate the value of this genre of fiction.

First, Tolkien argues that fairy-stories have an integral role in the presentation of the created world and man's place within it. He writes, "*Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted."⁴² As a Roman Catholic, Tolkien believes that the world was created by God and that through the use of fiction, man's place within that created order can become clear. He continues this line of thought later in the essay when writing, "It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine."⁴³

Second, fairy-stories enable the writer to engage in sub-creation, the creation of a fictional world that is most properly accomplished when one understands the Creation of God, the ultimate Creator. For Tolkien, writing a fairy-story is not an exercise in falsehood, but an exercise in the telling of truth. When responding to a man who called myth and fairy-story "lies," Tolkien writes,

*"Dear Sir," I said—Although now long estranged,
Man is not wholly lost nor wholly changed.
Dis-graced he may be, yet is not de-throned,
and keeps the rags of lordship once he owned:
Man, Sub-Creator, the refracted Light
through whom is splintered from a single White
to many hues, and endlessly combined
in living shapes that move from mind to mind.
Though all the crannies of the world we filled
with Elves and Goblins, though we dared to build
Gods and their houses out of dark and light,
and sowed the seed of dragons—'twas our right*

⁴¹J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 33–99.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 38.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 78.

*(used or misused). That right has not decayed:
we make still by the law in which we're made.*⁴⁴

Within this poem, Tolkien alludes to numerous biblical truths: the fallen nature of man, the retention of the image of God, the God-given responsibility to rule creation, the effectiveness of story for communicating powerfully, and the secondary nature of man's work of sub-creation.

Third, Tolkien holds that the fairy-story is an effective means of communicating the good news of the gospel. He notes the effectiveness of fairy-stories in accomplishing what he calls "eucatastrophe," explained as follows, "In its fairy-tale—or otherworld—setting, it is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is *evangelium*, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief."⁴⁵ Within this consolation of the happy ending, Tolkien thinks there are pointers to the happiest ending of all, the gospel of Jesus Christ. He makes this point clear in the conclusion to his essay,

The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man's history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation. This story begins and ends in joy. It has pre-eminently the "inner consistency of reality." There is no tale ever told that men would rather find was true, and none which so many sceptical men have accepted as true on its own merits. For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art, that is of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or to wrath.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This issue of the *Southwestern Journal of Theology* is dedicated to the pursuit of the virtue of reading. The decision to read outside Scripture ought to be made only after careful consideration of the reasons for doing so. It is to this end that the article opened with seven reasons for extrabiblical reading. The article then turned to the task of encouraging students, alumni, and scholars to select great works of literature from the fields of academia, biography, and fiction. Each of these areas holds great promise for the development of the Christian mind.

⁴⁴Ibid., 74.

⁴⁵Ibid., 86.

⁴⁶Ibid., 88–89.

It is hoped that some who read this article will be encouraged not only to read in these different genres but also to write in them. This is a topic deserving of another issue of the *Journal* in the future, so this article will close with only a brief comment in this regard. While the consumption of great literature is a virtue, even more virtuous is the production of great literature. Christians engage in the greatest of all academic pursuits—the knowledge and wisdom of God, they live the greatest of all lives—each one of us a sinner turned saint by the grace of God, and they possess the greatest of all stories to tell—King Jesus vanquishes the Red Dragon. Perhaps some who read this article will take up the mantle left behind by Aquinas the academician, Augustine the autobiographer, and Bunyan the storyteller, and join those who through reading and writing become all things to all men so that they may by all means save some.