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THEOLOGY AND READING

FINDING FRIENDS

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Finding Friends

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Periodically, students in chapel hear the president say that they will have to provide proof that they have accumulated 1,500 volumes in their respective personal libraries in order to receive the graduation diploma. Of course, they realize that this is not an actual requirement. The president is urging them to accumulate 1,500 “friends,” which can make a big difference in their ministries and these 1,500 volumes mark only the beginning of a lifetime discipline of acquiring tools of the trade!

When people visit the president’s home, they often wander into my personal library where they find about 22,000 volumes. They often ask, “Have you read all of these books?” No, but I have made use of almost every one of them at some point and continue to do so on a regular basis. They constitute, in fact, the invaluable tools of the prophet of God who wants to satiate himself with every understanding of God and the world that He created.

But someone may protest, “Aren’t you aware of the fact that in this electronic era you no longer need much more than your laptop to procure almost any information you want?” Yes, I keep a Kindle with me, especially when I am traveling, since there are certain kinds of books that I can read with great profit on the Kindle and since the weight of luggage in travel, which these days has become increasingly important, is reduced thereby. And yes, I do research on the internet as well. The obvious advantages of these electronic assets is their quick access to information, the portability of knowledge, and the fact that archival information may be more safely stored electronically. Furthermore, books have not always been bound as the volumes that line my shelves. The earliest books were clay tablets, progressing to scrolls, and finally to the codex.

The era of the introduction of the printing press, of course, was one of the most monumental forward leaps in all of history. One must remember that the content of the book rather than its physical properties make the book valuable. Even those who continue to be critics of the coming

e-book age must face the fact that eventually most of the problems with digital books will be resolved. Why then own 1,500 books? Let me give you a few of the reasons.

1. Show me a man's library, and I will tell you about the man. I may not be able to gain access to his computer accessions; but when I walk into his library, I can discover rather quickly where his interests and concentrations lie. One would not have to look too long on the shelves of my library to discover that my major interest is exegetical theology—the attempt to discover what the Bible says. The secondary interest would be systematic theology. Then, of course, those special interests arising out of my own research, such as a love for history, biographies, animals, hunting, and scuba diving, are definitely there to be uncovered quickly in a search of the shelves of my library. Hopefully, some, in looking at my library, are influenced to become students themselves and to develop their own areas of major interest. I doubt that this attraction will ever be readily replaced electronically.
2. The particular way in which I use a book still cannot be fully duplicated electronically. For example, because I do read a great deal of history as well as other books, a visitor often picks up a volume and discovers either *NB*, *nota bene*, or *ill.* (which stands for illustration) written in the margins. The *NB* will usually note a particularly well expressed thought that may be of value to me in writing or sermonizing somewhere along the line. The *ill.* calls my attention to the fact that history marvelously illustrates a point like patience or courage or faith or some other pertinent topic. When I finish reading a book, I often turn to the back and make a list of the page numbers where the subject matter represented by those great illustrations occurred.
3. Marking, answering, and remembering can be easily done in a book. Excessive marking can be a waste of time and effort, of course; but some marking and an occasional answering of arguments in the margins—and certainly remembering these facts—is of great value. While I am a relatively slow reader and have been all of my life, I am a determined reader; and I have some capacity to remember approximately where in my reading I found certain things of great value to me for future reference. For example, I remember very early in my life reading and marking Calvin's treatment of the Ten

Commandments, which I thought then and believe now is one of the better treatments I have seen. I can pick up the *Institutes* and go immediately to that passage, which I have marked carefully.

4. There is a stack of books on my bedside table. I always have one or two in my briefcase on the airplane unless the Kindle holds some substitutes. You would find them also in my house in the room where the king goes alone. I have them in my automobile; and when hunting in Alaska and Africa, which are presently beyond electronic reach, I have read many a great book in the quietness of those solitary places.
5. Sometimes when I am working on a particular project, such as a commentary on the book of Revelation, which I have just completed, I have need of massive comparisons. I do realize that electronically one can place quite a bit on the screen but nothing like what I can spread out over three or four desks in my office for efficient comparisons.
6. The ability to give a book away and say to a young learner, "Now here is a book that blessed my soul. Why don't you take it?" One can certainly tell a young man where to go to find a volume on his computer, but that is not the same as having an autographed copy with a note of encouragement in the front. Often times, I have picked up books in my library, having forgotten where I got them but leafing through them find the dedication and thank God for the impact on my own life of that person who gave me the book.
7. Table-top books will not go out of fashion with the existence of electronic media, but I believe they will become more important as time goes along. Table-top books are those beautifully bound books on subjects such as the tabernacle or the Alaskan wilderness or whatever provides the beauty of photographs along with excellent readable and educational material.
8. The era of electronic media will have difficulty producing many genuine polymaths. Of course, there are not many of these, but anyone who hungers for God and for knowledge about God should aspire to this height of investigation. Certainly, polymaths will develop using electronic means alone, but they are much more likely to develop in the context of books on the shelf. In fact, I fear that the movement away from books on the shelf may eventually be a major hindrance to the acquisition of broad vistas of knowledge.

9. While I am certainly fully aware that the use of various indices accompanying genuinely good academic books are available to those who use only electronic means, I also have a suspicion that those who only use electronic media are less likely to make use of these valuable tools. For example, the index volume to Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is available electronically, but my guess is that it will be used even less than by those who pass over it on the shelf. For example, the preacher who is preaching on the subject of *Anthropology* and is able to go to that designation in the index to Barth's *Church Dogmatics* and check topically on the respective sections within those volumes has a tool that is valuable beyond compare. The same also goes for many other volumes.
10. Finally, when pursuing a subject such as the message of the book of Colossians, my ability to walk to the Colossians section in my library, pull down volumes, and quickly check to see whether or not these volumes have that for which I am looking and even to compare them with one another, as mentioned above, is something that would take enormous skill on a computer but can be done relatively quickly for one who has simply gathered and assessed valuable volumes.

For these reasons and many more, I believe it is important now and, in fact, for the foreseeable future for students to build significant libraries and learn to depend on them, accentuating those with the assistance of the electronic availability of knowledge in this generation. So to my students I say build a great library and do not stop at 1,500.