
Reading Spiritual Classics as Evangelical Protestants

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THE GREAT TRADITION OF SPIRITUAL CLASSICS is a mighty force to be reckoned with in the life of the evangelical Protestant churches. It is ancient and it still exists; it has shaped us and it still exerts power on us; it calls to us and it demands a response. Even if we attempted to ignore or silence the manifold witness of the spiritual classics, we would be responding (in the negative) to its call and thereby confessing that some response is necessary. But the negative response would be a bad one. The evangelical Protestant comportment toward the great tradition should not be closed; it should be open but cautious.

FIRST OPEN, THEN CAUTIOUS

“Open but cautious” is a characteristically evangelical motto. It originated among noncharismatic Christians describing their attitude toward charismatics and Pentecostals: While affirming that God could move in mysterious ways among his people, they reserved the right to make individual judgments about whether any particular manifestation was in fact the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit can move someone to speak in tongues or prophecy, but not every instance of glossolalia or prophecy should be automatically endorsed. Of course, charismatics could see for themselves that noncharismatics were abundantly cau-

tious, but have often wanted to press the question of whether people so meticulously cautious could be described as authentically open. Writing as a noncharismatic, I can testify that "theoretically possible, but practically quite unlikely" is often a more accurate account of the attitude toward putative miraculous gifts. Still, the expressed ideal is to be open but cautious, and the expressed ideal is wise.

Evangelical Protestants confronting two thousand years of Christian spiritual classics can apply the same terms. But echoing the concerns of the worried charismatic, we might need to spend a little time insisting that evangelical Protestants should prove their openness before going on to describe their cautiousness. In other words, the evangelical attitude toward the spiritual classics ought to be first open and then cautious. To be more precise: If evangelical Protestants know what they are about as people of the biblical gospel, first of all they will read widely in the spiritual classics, and second they will read evangelically. To read spiritual classics widely is to begin with almost any old book that has a reputation for spiritual helpfulness; the book you are holding is full of recommended texts. Take up and read! To read spiritual classics evangelically is to read for the gospel: seeking out the gospel, presupposing the gospel, guided by the gospel and jealous for the gospel. Of these four elements of the evangelical attitude (seeking out, presupposing, guided by and jealous for), the first two are positive, while the second two imply norms and canons of judgment.

RECOMMENDING BOOKS

It is certainly part of the culture of evangelical Protestantism to read spiritual classics. The movement is of course characterized by its focus on the Bible, but along with that focus it has always worked with a steady stream of other writings. Alongside Bible reading there has always been a recognition of the value of spiritual reading more broadly, of engaging in the reading of extrabiblical devotional writings as a spiritual practice. We could go further and say that evangelicals not only recognize the reading of books as a spiritual practice but actually make recommending books into a spiritual practice with serious pastoral implications. To know the right books to recommend to inquirers is a sign of pastoral insight.

Take an example from the evangelical Protestants on the cusp of fundamentalism. A hundred years ago, in a 1911 issue of *The King's Business*, the founders of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles made this proclamation: "Buying and selling books with some, is like buying and selling potatoes—a mere perfunctory business. With us, buying and selling books is a matter of as much spiritual import as teaching the Bible."¹ Could these doughty, radical evangelicals, these proto-fundamentalists, whose glory was their confession that the Bible and the Bible alone is the very word of God, really have meant to call book selling "a matter of as much spiritual import as teaching the Bible"? Indeed, they meant it, because evangelicals have long understood that the power of life and death is often in the recommendation of a book. They were not, of course, suggesting that other books were on a level with Scripture. They said no such thing. What they said was that they considered their ministry of handling books (stocking them in their downtown bookstore, endorsing and recommending "Best Books," distributing them free of charge when possible) to be a ministry as serious as their ministry of teaching Scripture. Evangelicals handle and distribute books differently than any other items, because they are not just merchandise ("like buying and selling potatoes") but written words that form souls, move hearts, change minds. These are books! The editors went on to say:

We handle books for the glory of God and cannot buy or sell those that we do not believe will accord with the teaching of God's Word. The reading of one book might undermine the faith of a person or destroy his soul. The reading of another book might lead a soul into the eternal light or arouse to a life of devotion.²

It is almost a hallmark of evangelicalism to take book recommendations so seriously. Evangelical Protestants have no *nihil obstat* or imprimaturs from a central magisterium, but in place of them they have a network of endorsements and recommendations. Seen from this perspective, maybe one of J. I. Packer's most important ministries has been his ubiquitous endorsing of good books for decades. The evangelical

¹"About the Book Business," *The King's Business* 3, no 5 (1912), p. 131, www2.biola.edu/kingsbusiness/view/3/5/36.

²Ibid.

book-recommending network is as old as evangelicalism itself; the evangelical movement seems to have been born in a flurry of literary recommendations. The Reformation in England started as a network of book recommendations among the scholars at Cambridge: not just a covert circulating library for forbidden books by Luther or for the Greek New Testament, but a regular Erasmus Book Club meeting at the White Horse Inn. In the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century, the circulation and recommendation of best books was a driving force. Susannah Wesley recommended the "excellent good book," Henry Scougal's 1677 book *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, to her son Charles, who recommended it to George Whitefield in 1733. Whitefield later testified that he never knew what true religion was until he was enlightened by that book: "O what a ray of divine life did then break in upon my soul!"³ The same circle of evangelicals circulated among themselves August Francke's book *Nicodemus, Or, Against the Fear of Man*, which they credited as being directly responsible for encouraging them to take their gospel preaching out of the churches and into the public spaces. Not only the content of their evangelical preaching (the life of God in the soul) but the style and some of the methods (exhortations to countercultural boldness) were derived from the careful recommending and circulating of spiritual classics.

SEEKING THE GOSPEL

To read spiritual classics evangelically is to read in a way that seeks out the gospel. In broadest terms this is the same thing as reading devotionally. The good that is in spiritual classics has to be dug out, and only a reader who comes to the book with a determination to hear from God through it will be rightly prepared.

For an example of this kind of reading, we can turn to John Wesley. In 1735 he published an abridgment of Thomas à Kempis's classic 1441 book *The Imitation of Christ*. Wesley's edition was called *The Christian's Pattern*. By way of introduction to the classic, Wesley gave his readers a short set of directions "concerning the manner of reading this (or any other) reli-

³George Whitefield, cited in F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 472.

gious treatise." He published the instructions for readers "who, knowing they have not yet attained, neither are already perfect, mind this one thing, and, pressing toward the mark, despise no assistance which is offered them."⁴ The instructions were not quite of Wesley's own devising; he translated and modified them from the Latin introduction of a seventeenth-century edition of the *Imitation*. If John Wesley had written these notes from scratch, they would be worth attending to because of Wesley's stature and credentials as an evangelical leader. But the notes in fact give us much more, with multiple layers of agreement. They are tips on devotional reading, inspired by one of the bestselling spiritual classics of all time, a fifteenth-century work. They were composed by an anonymous seventeenth-century commentator and then edited by John Wesley in the eighteenth century. The result is classic advice on exactly how to do it: Schedule time for spiritual reading, read for a changed heart and ask God to make it happen, read "leisurely, seriously, and with great attention," get into the attitude of the work you're reading, finish books, look for action points and pray for God to do what only God can do.

Wesley's first tip is to "assign some stated time every day for this employment; and observe it, so far as you possibly can, inviolably." One thing to note is that spiritual reading is important enough to be done this often. But Wesley's main point is that the time should be definitely scheduled, and that schedule should be kept: "But if necessary business, which you could not foresee or defer, should sometimes rob you of your hour of retirement, take the next to it; or, if you cannot have that, at least the nearest you can."⁵

As for the reading itself, it must be done prayerfully and earnestly, with spiritual formation as the goal. "Prepare yourself for reading, by purity of intention, singly aiming at the good of your soul, and by fervent prayer to God, that he would enable you to see his will, and give you a firm resolution to perform it."⁶ Wesley went on to recommend the sort of prayer that ought to be offered before spiritual reading: "An excellent

⁴The best available edition of these remarks is "Advice on Spiritual Reading," in the *John and Charles Wesley*, ed. Frank Whaling, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), pp. 88-89. Whaling explains the complex publishing history on p. 66 of his introduction.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶*Ibid.*

form of prayer for this very purpose you have in the second or third book of this Treatise.”⁷ In pointing to prayers from *The Imitation of Christ*, Wesley may have in mind any of a dozen passages from books 2 and 3. Perhaps the prayer “thou art my wisdom” is most appropriate.

Such reading takes time and attention, and Wesley is quite warm on this subject:

Be sure to read, not cursorily or hastily, but leisurely, seriously, and with great attention; with proper pauses and intervals, that you may allow time for the enlightenings of the divine grace. To this end, recollect, every now and then, what you have read, and consider how to reduce it to practice. Farther, let your reading be continued and regular, not rambling and desultory. To taste of many things, without fixing upon any, shows a vitiated palate, and feeds the disease which makes it pleasing.

Wesley considered that time and attention would also lead readers to read a book through all the way to the end, though they could then go back and re-read the isolated passages that were more pertinent to their own situation or inclinations. After grasping the whole of the book, these individual passages could be “pressed home to the soul” if the reader would add “a particular examination” of their own conscience under each of them.

Most important, Wesley exhorted evangelical readers of spiritual classics to bring themselves into spiritual alignment with the book they were reading. Each classic demanded to be read in the spirit in which it was written. At the time of actual reading, this meant that a certain kind of intense prayer was required:

work yourself up into a temper correspondent with what you read; for that reading is useless which only enlightens the understanding, without warming the affections. And therefore intersperse, here and there, earnest aspirations to God, for his heat as well as his light.⁸

Again turning from more holistic advice to more fragmentary, Wesley recommended special treatment for a few “remarkable sayings or advices,” advising readers:

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

treasure them up in your memory; and these you may either draw forth in time of need, as arrows from a quiver against temptation (more especially against the solicitations to that sin which most easily besets you) or make use of as incitements to any virtue, to humility, patience, or the love of God.⁹

Wesley's final advice was to conclude any time of spiritual reading with a brief prayer of consecration, placing yourself in the hands of God that he "would so bless the good seed sown in your heart, that it may bring forth fruit unto life eternal."¹⁰ Wesley's advice for readers of spiritual classics, in other words, is to read as if life depended on it. In his presentation we have an example of an evangelical reading of spiritual classics which is demonstrably wide open to instruction.

READING WITH A STANDARD

Evangelical Protestants who read spiritual classics drawn from other sectors of the church, and especially from the long traditions of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spirituality, face a special challenge. They have a unique need to be open but cautious. When reading across confessional lines in this manner, the evangelical reader should extend generosity and charity for several reasons. For one thing, when it comes to recognized classics of spiritual writing, the evangelical Protestant will usually find more areas of agreement with the Catholic and Orthodox writers than areas of disagreement. Some sense of measure and perspective is necessary. The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have preserved and confessed the doctrine of the Trinity, the incarnation and the atonement. Turning from these high, central doctrinal matters to more practical matters, spiritual classics from these traditions will focus on prayer, Scripture and service. Just naming these two triads of concerns ought to be enough to demonstrate that the area of common ground is extensive, at both the practical and the doctrinal ends of the spectrum. Most of Christian spirituality is located in the areas that we have in common with the other Christian confessions.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 89.

Even if we turn our attention to the standard points of contention, such as *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*, the supreme authority of Scripture alone and salvation by faith alone, a generous evangelical will admit that writers from other traditions come close to getting it right. At least they do not say the opposite. For example, if evangelical Protestants say that Scripture has authority, Roman Catholics don't say that it doesn't. Catholics confess that Scripture is authoritative in the church. Though at its worst the Roman Catholic tradition has flirted with formulations about Scripture and tradition as two sources of revelation, at its best the Roman Catholic Church has even given Scripture a position of primacy over its magisterial interpreters. Evangelicals who come to Roman Catholic spiritual writings looking for a clear and compelling confession of the supremacy of Scripture will be disappointed. They will find an unclear and less than compelling confession of Scripture's authority. They will find what they were looking for, but they will find it compromised and cluttered, set in the wrong context and juxtaposed with distractions. Similarly, evangelicals reading Eastern Orthodox spiritual classics will be encouraged by the evident reverence for the Word of God, but in the next moment will find Scripture being juggled away into the larger dialectic of Holy Tradition, as one element within it. To take the other crucial area of disagreement, soteriology, an evangelical looking for a perfectly clear statement about salvation by grace will find instead, by his lights, a host of imperfect and unclear statements. It is not so much that these other churches deny the crucial doctrines about Scriptural authority and salvation by faith. They do not deny them. They teach them, but they teach them badly. That judgment is harsh enough, but note that it is considerably less harsh and functions less as a pretext for dismissiveness than the judgment that these churches deny the doctrines. Even in the areas of Scriptural authority and salvation by faith, in other words, there are significant areas of overlap before the decisive disagreement is reached.

Still, if the areas of disagreement are important enough, they can spoil the entire mixture. Rat poison is 95 percent corn meal, and no pleading about percentages or a sense of proportion will suffice to make it healthy. Generosity and charity only go so far toward sustaining a re-

lationship in the face of serious disagreement. These nonevangelical traditions may hold the gospel itself in stewardship, but they are messing it up, and a messed-up gospel is not the gospel; its result is dysangel, not evangel; bad news, not good.

THE GOSPEL IS EASILY SPOILED

Anglican bishop J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) provided the most helpful warning about how to distinguish evangelical religion from nonevangelical, and his guidelines are useful for discerning how to read spiritual classics evangelically. "There are many ways in which the faith of Christ may be marred and spoiled, without being positively denied," Ryle wrote.¹¹ Much religion that goes by the name of Christian is not consistently evangelical. There are five characteristics of truly evangelical religion. Evangelical religion emphasizes:

Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice, the only test of truth, the only judge of controversy

the doctrine of human sinfulness and corruption

the work and office of Jesus for salvation

the inward work of the Holy Spirit

the outward work of the Holy Spirit in the life¹²

Ryle admits that these five elements are all to be found widely scattered in nonevangelical Christian theology. They can each be found, if considered one by one. "Propound them separately, as points to be believed, and they would admit them every one."¹³ But evangelicals are concerned not only that these doctrines be taught but that they be emphasized, that they stand out, that they are the first things to arrest the attention of hearers and the main focus of disciples. From the evangelical perspective, the other systems teach them, but badly.

¹¹J. C. Ryle, "Evangelical Religion," in *Knots Untied: Being Plain Statements on Disputed Points in Religion from the Standpoint of an Evangelical Churchman* (London: National Protestant Church Union, 1898), p. 19.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 4-9.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 9.

They do not give them the prominence, position, rank, degree, priority, dignity, and precedence which we do. And this I hold to be a most important difference between us and them. It is the position which we assign to these points, which is one of the grand characteristics of Evangelical theology. We say boldly that they are first, foremost, chief, and principal things in Christianity, and that want of attention to their position mars and spoils the teaching of many well-meaning Churchmen.¹⁴

Ryle says this failure to emphasize evangelical truths "mars and spoils" the statement of Christian truth in much religion. The main idea seems to be that the presentation of the gospel is actually spoiled, as Ryle goes on to develop the metaphor. "The Gospel in fact," he warns, "is a most curiously and delicately compounded medicine, and a medicine that is very easily spoiled."¹⁵ He lists four ways it can be spoiled: By substitution, addition, interposition, disproportion or confused and contradictory directions.¹⁶

The gospel is spoiled "by substitution" when the Christian message is presented in such a way that any object besides Christ crucified is presented as the object of saving faith. Substitution implies both a negative and a positive moment: Christ is set aside out of the line of vision (the negative moment), and something else is put in the place he should occupy (the positive moment, where another object is posited). The substitute will of course be something good, usually something biblical. It could be (as Ryle's conflict with unevangelical Anglo-Catholicism suggested to him) "the Church, the Ministry, the Confessional, Baptism, or the Lord's Supper," all good and some necessary elements of the Christian religion. But as soon as they are put in the place of Christ, "the mischief is done. Substitute anything for Christ, and the Gospel is totally spoiled! Do this, either directly or indirectly, and your religion ceases to be Evangelical."¹⁷ For our purposes, we can say "the spiritual classic you are reading ceases to be evangelical."

Another way to spoil the gospel is "by addition." Ryle uses very similar language to describe this error:

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 19-20.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 19.

You have only to add to Christ, the grand object of faith, some other objects as equally worthy of honour, and the mischief is done. Add anything to Christ, and the Gospel ceases to be a pure Gospel! Do this, either directly or indirectly, and your religion ceases to be Evangelical.¹⁸

He does not say anything more specific under this heading, but the obvious idea is that more is less; anything added to Christ as an object of faith subtracts from his unique honor. Closely related is spoiling the gospel "by interposition." Spatially, this metaphor involves not setting something alongside Christ, but pushing "something between Christ and the eye of the soul, to draw away the sinner's attention from the Saviour." As with the previous errors, "the mischief is done. Interpose anything between man and Christ, and man will neglect Christ for the thing interposed!"¹⁹

More subtle, perhaps, is spoiling the gospel "by disproportion." "You have only to attach an exaggerated importance to the secondary things of Christianity, and a diminished importance to the first things, and the mischief is done. Once alter the proportion of the parts of truth, and truth soon becomes downright error!"²⁰

Note that this critique is one that Ryle would be just as likely to level at other evangelical Protestants. Anybody with a temptation to adopt a favorite doctrine, or to emphasize denominational or party distinctives out of proportion to the main things, is liable to spoil the gospel by disproportion. R. A. Torrey once complained of a disproportional emphasis on eschatology among evangelicals who were committed to premillennialism. He believed the doctrine was true, but he insisted "it is not enough to teach the truth; it should be taught in Scripture proportions."

Doubtless another thing that causes very determined opposition to Pre-millenarian teaching and Pre-millenarian teachers, is that so many Pre-millenarians make a hobby of their doctrine. The truth of the Pre-millenarian position is precious to the writer of this editorial, but there are many other things taught in the Bible beside the Pre-millennial Coming of our Lord, and it is not enough to teach the truth; it should be taught in

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 20.

²⁰Ibid.

Scripture proportions; and to be everlastingly harping on just one truth, no matter how true it is, and no matter how precious it is, does harm and not good and even serves to bring that truth into reproach and disrepute.²¹

Ryle's final warning is that the gospel can be spoiled "by confused and contradictory directions." He describes this problem at more length:

Complicated and obscure statements about faith, baptism, Church privileges, and the benefits of the Lord's Supper, all jumbled together, and thrown down without order before hearers, make the Gospel no Gospel at all! Confused and disorderly statements of Christianity are almost as bad as no statement at all! Religion of this sort is not Evangelical.²²

PRINCIPLED ECLECTICISM

How do Ryle's strictures apply to an evangelical reading of spiritual classics? How do we evaluate books with these gospel-spoiling dangers in mind? We read widely in the classics, presupposing the gospel in the sense that we know what it is before we start reading, and we will recognize it when we come across it in a spiritual classic. We are guided by the gospel, so that we will immediately know when it is missing from what we are reading. We seek out the gospel, meaning that we read in such a way that can find the good news even when it is present in a fragmentary, disguised or distorted way. And we are jealous for the gospel, meaning that we cannot be satisfied by any disguised, distorted or otherwise deficient presentation of the gospel. If we are to go shopping in the spiritual classics with this kind of attitude of freedom and potential criticism, we had better be appropriately humble about how much we have to learn, but also appropriately bold about confessing that we know what an evangelical reading of the classics would look like. Ryle's own five-point list of things to be emphasized included the authority of Scripture as "the only rule of faith and practice, the only test of truth, the only judge of controversy," the doctrine of human corruption, the work and office of Jesus for salvation, and the work of the Holy Spirit both inwardly and outwardly. There are other ways of verbalizing the core

²¹R. A. Torrey, "Light on Puzzling Passages and Problems," *The King's Business* 7, no. 1 (1916): 24.

²²Ryle, "Evangelical Religion," p. 20.

commitments of evangelical theology and spirituality; the solas that summarize the Reformation's teaching might also serve: sola scriptura, sola Christus, sola gratia, sola fide and soli Dei Gloria.

Such a clear statement of principles will equip evangelicals to read widely and critically in the spiritual classics. Evangelicals will still need generosity, teachableness and charity at every step, especially when handling ancient works that have proven themselves useful and edifying to multiple generations. But if our principles are sound, we should not be cowed by mere antiquity, popularity or consensus. Even in the church's earliest postbiblical literature, there is an evident mixture of the good and the bad, such that categories of judgment must be made clearer. In the collection known as the Apostolic Fathers, texts like the *Epistle to Diognetus* are charming and thrilling, falling easily into line with the codified doctrine of later ages. On the other hand, in the same ancient collection is the *Shepherd of Hermas*, whose edifying value is less obvious (though Athanasius praised it highly) and whose false trails and dangers are immediately evident.

We also encounter ancient books with minor points of provocation in them. In feasting on the writings of Athanasius, we may be caught short to find him calling Mary not just the virgin but the "ever-virgin," that is, testifying to his belief in the perpetual virginity of Mary. Often these minor points should be considered irritations, not obstacles. It would of course be wonderful if all authors of spiritual classics lined up exactly with our own beliefs and commitments. But ancient authors follow their own rules, and wise readers will rapidly adjust their expectations. The teaching about the perpetual virginity of Mary is a relatively minor issue; in fact many Protestants, including Turretin, have taught it as likely and as biblically defensible. Anyone who runs across such a reference in a classic author like Athanasius is not so much critically judging Athanasius as being judged by the book itself: if you cannot come to see the perpetual virginity of Mary as a minor issue, you are suffering from a weak sense of proportion.

But there is no universal guarantee, censoring service or "safe list" that might determine for all times who is trustworthy and who is not. Most authors are mixed bags, with something to teach us and some-

thing to avoid. When an expression, passage or line of thought seems to run afoul of evangelical guidelines, the alert reader must quickly decide whether the deviation is simply annoyance-level deviation or a sign of a serious problem. John Henry Newman's beautiful and profound poem *The Dream of Gerontius* is a classic poetic meditation on the death of a Christian. It includes stanzas as good as anything ever written in English spirituality:

Praise to the Holiest in the height,
 And in the depth be praise;
 In all His words most wonderful;
 Most sure in all His ways!²³

And there is nothing else quite like it by any other author. Yet the opening lines are immediately annoying to readers with Protestant commitments:

Jesu, Maria—I am near to death,
 And Thou art calling me; I know it now.²⁴

Hardly a promising note for ecumenical appreciation, especially for evangelical Protestants reading this spiritual classic by a Roman Catholic. Should this invocation of Mary (a few lines later the speaker cries, "Mary, pray for me!") be shrugged off as merely annoyance? Or is it symptomatic of something deeper, not just an error in Mariology but a symptom of a disorderly doctrine of grace itself? Just how unevangelical is *The Dream of Gerontius*? Is it an evangelical message with a little too much Mary slipped in? Or is it profoundly anti-evangelical? Either could be the case with John Henry Newman as author. But when it comes to a proven, time-tested classic like *Gerontius*, the judgment must come in the actual reading.

When making judgments about spiritual reading, the safest course is to have a well-developed set of theological categories, a solid and sharp set of tools for discriminating between the helpful and the harmful. But not everybody has the kind of biblical knowledge or theological

²³John Henry Newman, *The Dream of Gerontius* (London: Longmans, Green, 1888), pp. 39-40.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 5.

training to make these decisions incisively. Often a spiritually sensitive but theologically untrained believer will have an uneasy feeling when reading some spiritual classic. Without being able to articulate the reasons for the discomfort, the reader will nevertheless register a definite disturbance, feeling that something is amiss. What is to be done with these inarticulate feelings? Unless they can be drawn out, analyzed and stated in biblical or theological terms, they may be false alarms, prejudices or obstinate resistance to new ideas. On the other hand, they may just as easily be very real danger signs which the reader should heed. There are two good ways to proceed in such a case. First, seek the advice of somebody with greater understanding, training and exposure. A more mature believer may be able to clear away obstacles, explain confusions and redescribe the dynamics of a text. A more mature believer may also be able to recognize that some texts contain more harm than good, and ought in fact to be avoided. In recent years, for example, there has been an increased mingling of non-Christian spiritualities with Christian ideas, and some books that are eagerly circulated and recommended are in fact confusing mixtures of biblical and nonbiblical elements. Books like that should not be approached with the same openness as a genuine spiritual classic. They can be read, but with a more pronounced critical mindset rather than with a desire to hear from God and be transformed by the text. Remember that the old evangelical network of book recommendations is a kind of pastoral practice, and a good literary spiritual adviser would know you well enough to know what you need. The second way to proceed, if a trusted adviser is not at hand, is simply to play it safe and set the book aside. You can admit that you don't have enough theological training to render a final verdict on the book, while still doing justice to your sense of unease by acknowledging that this book is at least not likely to be good for you at this time.

Thomas Chalmers once said about Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* that it was "a very impressive performance." In a letter to a friend, he mused about whether this book passed evangelical muster. After all, it talks about being like Christ in our conduct, without putting its emphasis on the finished work of Christ for us. Chalmers

recognizes the charge and knows its seriousness. But he defends à Kempis's *Imitation*:

Some would say of it that it is not enough evangelical. He certainly does not often affirm, in a direct and ostensible manner, the righteousness that is by faith. But he proceeds on this doctrine, and many an incidental recognition does he bestow upon it; and I am not sure but that this implies a stronger and more habitual settlement of mind respecting it than when it is thrust forward and repeated, and repeated with a kind of ultra-orthodoxy, as if to vindicate one's soundness, and acquit oneself of a kind of exacted homage to the form of sound words.²⁵

Chalmers knew what he was about when it came to the gospel and to reading evangelically. But he also knew that an exaggerated insistence on the right formulas was counterproductive. He found in *The Imitation of Christ* all he needed from a spiritual classic, and what was lacking (an insistence on imputed righteousness) he presupposed a doctrine that the author "proceeds on" or presupposes with only "an incidental recognition" here and there.

LIFE OR DEATH

Evangelicals need to be open but cautious in their reading of the spiritual classics. We began with John Wesley advising how to approach the classics in such a way that we are wide open to being transformed by God as we interact with these books. We end with John Wesley from just a few years later in his career, in an instance where he used very sharp language in a letter to the actual author of a devotional book. "Books from time to time bowled Wesley over," says one historian, and a born influencer like John Wesley was bound to pass along these books which had become events in his life.²⁶ Contrarily, when he read a bad book (especially by an author he had reason to expect better of), he warned people away from it as if it were poison. Though he had learned so much from William Law's early works, when Law's later works took a turn toward the mystical, Wesley denounced them in public and scolded Law

²⁵Thomas Chalmers, cited in James Stalker, *Imago Christi: The Example of Jesus Christ* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1889), p. 10.

²⁶Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England 1688-1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 353.

in a personal letter. In fact, after his evangelical awakening at Aldersgate, Wesley wrote to Law in the strongest terms, demanding to know why Law had never written more clearly about justification by faith. For all the good that Wesley had drawn from Law's books, when he looked back on them he noticed that the most important thing was missing. He wrote to Law:

How will you answer it to our common Lord that you never gave me this advice? Did you never read the Acts of the Apostles, or the answer of Paul to him who said, "What must I do to be saved"? Or are you wiser than he? Why did I scarce ever hear you name the name of Christ; never, so as to ground anything upon "faith in His blood"? . . . If you say you advised other things as preparatory to this, what is this but laying a foundation below the foundation? Is not Christ, then, the first as well as the last? If you say you advised them because you knew that I had faith already, verily you knew nothing of me; you discerned not my spirit at all. I know that I had not faith, unless the faith of a devil, the faith of Judas, that speculative, notional, airy shadow, which lives in the head, not in the heart.²⁷

Wesley presses Law even further, asking him to "consider deeply and impartially, whether the true reason of your never pressing this upon me was not this—that you had it not yourself."²⁸

These are harsh words, but Wesley strikes the true evangelical note when he talks of books as having the power of life and death in them. Once he came to experience saving faith in Christ, he looked back with shame and horror on some of the books he had recommended before. They were good books, but some of them talked up obedience to the exclusion of faith, highlighted personal righteousness and obscured the righteousness of Christ. Little wonder that Wesley spent so much energy in later life in circulating "Best Books," books he selected more carefully with an eye on the main things of the gospel: his Christian Library that he distributed through his network of preachers.²⁹

²⁷John Wesley, cited in Luke Tyerman, *The Life and Times of the Rev. John Wesley, Founder of the Methodists* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1876), 1:186.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹See Thomas Walter Herbert, *John Wesley as Editor and Author* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), pp. 25-31.

"Buying and selling books with some, is like buying and selling potatoes." But evangelicals are in earnest about the books they recommend and pass around to each other. The simple question, "What's a good book to read on subject X?" is not just a bibliographic query. It can provoke considerable soul-searching. On that book recommendation hangs serious responsibility, and the possibility of great blessing.