



Thoughts from the Bible and Books

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A Baker's Dozen of Books

People will often ask me "Read any good books, lately?" My response is always to pause, not because I haven't read any books, but because I can't recall what I've read lately. So last week I grabbed all the books off my shelf that I've read in the last year and had Becky type them up in a list for me. Then I marked the ones worth reading and recommending. I thought I'd pass this second list along to you, not because you have to read as many books as I do (praise the Lord, some of you actually have practical abilities), but perchance you have some hard-to-shop-for bibliophiles on your Christmas list, or maybe you're just curious as to what your pastor reads when he's not preparing for sermons. So here's a baker's dozen of intriguing books from 2005.

If you have heard about the emerging church and want a thoughtful critique, you can try D.A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan). His analysis treats kindly some aspects of this new postmodern way of approaching church and is critical toward other aspects. Along the same lines, but at a more philosophical level, is the book *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Crossway), edited by Millard Erickson and others. In this series of essays, a host of evangelical authors respond to a movement of post-conservative and post-foundational theologians and practitioners who seem to be emphasizing experience over doctrine, piety over theology, and a coherence view of truth over a correspondence view of truth. Erickson and others would like to "reclaim the center" where truth and grace converge.

Two books about church life have been especially thought provoking. The first is *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: Six Views* (Zondervan). The book is what it says, a look at 6 different approaches to corporate worship: liturgical, traditional, contemporary, charismatic, blended, and emerging. The interaction among the six writers is especially helpful. The second book is *The Deliberate Church: Building your Ministry on the Gospel* (Crossway) by Mark Dever and Paul Alexander. Dever, who is a pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington D.C., is easy to read and exceedingly practical. He offers good suggestions for worship, evangelism, membership, staffing and a number of other issues. Because the book is so practical and so explicit in its advice, you probably won't agree with every jot and tittle, but you will be stimulated by Dever's approach to "doing church."

Eugene Peterson's spiritual theology, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, is a good complement to Dever. Where Dever is practical and nitty-gritty, Peterson is deep and imaginative. In this latest book, Peterson, best known for *The Message*, shows how Christ "plays" in creation, history and community.

In the category of "other" are two books that couldn't be more different. The first is *Business for the Glory of God* (Crossway) by Wayne Grudem. This little book (it's only 70 pages of main text) would be a perfect gift for your colleagues in business. While warning against the dangers of money and possessions, Grudem demonstrates how the Bible commends ownership, productivity, and even competition. The other "other" book is by a Mormon. Earlier this year, Eerdmans

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published *A Different Jesus? The Christ of Latter-Day Saints* by Robert Millet, a professor at BYU. The book, with a Foreword and Afterword by Fuller president Richard Mouw, sets a more conciliatory tone toward Mormon theology than I'm comfortable with, but, nevertheless it was fascinating to read how a Mormon describes the Christ of LDS.

I don't usually venture much into church-growth material, but two books by Thom Rainer piqued my curiosity. *Breakout Churches* (Zondervan) is modeled on Jim Collins' *Good to Great* and it shows. The book is really *Good to Great* as a model for church. While I was turned off by the obsession with numbers and an over reliance on Collins, I was challenged by Rainer's insistence that a "breakout" church has a least 26 conversions a year (one every other week). His number may be somewhat arbitrary, but it made me think, "How far back would we have to go to count 26 conversions?" Hopefully not very far. The other Rainer book was *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Zondervan). Instead of asking the unchurched what they would like in a church (the question most researchers ask), Rainer asked the formerly unchurched why they started coming to church. His "findings" are astounding. By a two-to-one margin, the most important factors in leading the unchurched to choose a church were preaching and doctrine, even more than friendliness and good ministries, and far more than worship style. Rainer's book is an attempt to dispel widely held myths about the unchurched - myths like "the unchurched are turned off by denominational names in the church name" or "the unchurched cannot be reached by direct personal evangelism" or "we must be careful in our teaching and preaching so that we do not communicate deep and complex biblical truths that will confuse the unchurched." The book wears a little thin after 250 pages, but it's worth reading, the first half especially.

On to church history for the final selections. I love reading about churches, especially good churches, so I thoroughly enjoyed *Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia: 175 Years of Thinking and Acting Biblically* (Presbyterian and Reformed). It was inspiring to read how this church has impacted Philadelphia and literally the world. It was encouraging to read about its imperfections too. *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (Rutgers University Press) is one of the most

provocative church history books I've read in some time. In *Churching*, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark argue that as churches grow more powerful, more educated, more well-connected with societal elites, and more professional, the weaker and more irrelevant they actually become. I didn't always appreciate their heavy reliance on marketplace metaphors, but their overriding thesis is challenging. For over 300 pages, Finke and Stark argue that "to the degree that denominations rejected traditional doctrines and ceased to make serious demands on their followers, they ceased to prosper. The churching of America was accomplished by aggressive churches committed to vivid otherworldliness."

Two biographies finish our stay in church history and round out the baker's dozen. *John Wesley: A Biography* (Eerdmans) by Stephen Tomkins reads like a good story. The story is helped in considerable part by its subject matter. I may prefer Calvin's theology, but Wesley's life was more interesting. Wesley was a character—almost always inspiring and almost always eccentric. This is an enjoyable read. And last, but not least, you may want to pick up Kevin Belmonte's book *Hero for Humanity: A Biography of William Wilberforce* (NavPress). This is a moving account of Wilberforce's conversion and indefatigable pursuit of the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. If you are involved in politics or have any inclination thereto, this will be an encouraging book.

Enjoy your reading, and don't forget to spend time in the Good Book before testing out these good books.

Notes and Quotes

John Newton writing to Wilberforce about his calling in life to work for the abolition of the British slave trade:

"Some of [God's] people may be emphatically said not to live to themselves. May it not be said of you you?... You meet with many things which weary and disgust you...but then they are inseparably connected with your path of duty; and *though you cannot do all the good you wish for, some good is done*...Indeed the great point for our comfort in life is to have a well grounded persuasion that we are, where, all things considered, we ought to be."