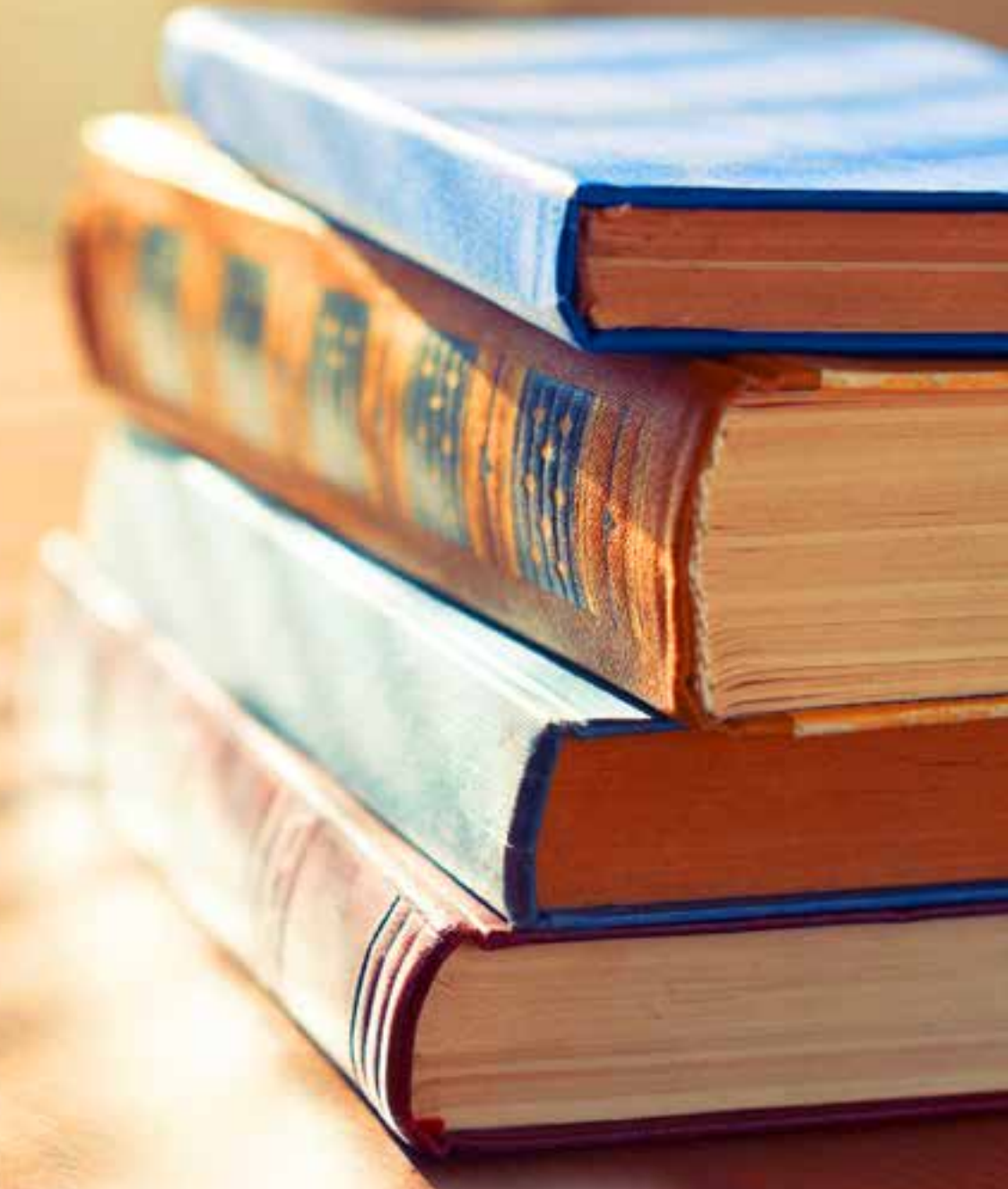


DIRECTIONS FOR PROFITABLE HEARING AND READING



RICHARD BAXTER (1615-1691)

Directions for Profitable Hearing and Reading

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Note: Richard Baxter formulated a unique approach to the doctrines of salvation that appears to be an attempt to reconcile Calvinist and Arminian thought. We find Baxter's thoughts on practical subjects very helpful but would encourage the reader to exercise much caution regarding his understanding of predestination, the atonement, and especially justification. The material in this booklet is taken from *A Christian directory, or, A summ of practical theologie and cases of conscience directing Christians how to use their knowledge and faith, how to improve all helps and means, and to perform all duties, how to overcome temptations, and to escape or mortifie every sin : in four parts.*

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Directions for Profitable Hearing and Reading

I. Directions for Profitably Hearing the Word Preached

Omitting those directions which concern the external modes of worship, I shall give you such directions about the personal, internal management of your duty, as I think most necessary to your edification. And seeing that your duty and benefit lieth in these four general points 1) that you hear with understanding, 2) that you remember what you hear, 3) that you be duly affected with it, and 4) that you sincerely practice it, I shall more particularly direct you in order to all these ends and duties.

1. Directions for Understanding the Word Which You Hear

Direction 1: Read and meditate on the Holy Scriptures much in private.

Then you will be the better able to understand what is preached on it in public, and to try the doctrine, whether it be of God. Whereas if you are unacquainted with the Scriptures, all that is treated of or alleged from them, will be so strange to you, that you will be but little edified by it (Psa 1:2; Deu 6:11-12).

Direction 2: Live under the clearest, most distinct, most convincing teaching that you can possibly procure.

There is an unspeakable difference as to the edification of the hearers, between a judicious, clear, distinct, and useful preacher, and one that is ignorant, confused, general, dry, and only scrapeth together a cento¹ or mingle-mangle of some undigested sayings to fill up the hour with. If in philosophy, physic,² grammar, law, and every art and science, there be so great a difference between one teacher and

¹ **cento** – hodgepodge collection, especially of quotations from others.

² **physic** – medicine.

another, it must needs be so in divinity³ also. Ignorant teachers that understand not what they say themselves are unlikely to make you orthodox and sound.

Direction 3: Come not to hear with a careless heart, as if you were to hear a matter that little concerned you.

But come with a sense of the unspeakable weight, necessity, and consequence of the holy Word which you are to hear; and when you understand how much you are concerned in it, and truly love it, as the Word of life, it will greatly help your understanding of every particular truth.

That which a man loveth not, and perceiveth no necessity of, he will hear with so little regard and heed,⁴ that it will make no considerable impression on his mind. But a good understanding of the excellency and necessity, exciting love and serious attention, would make the particulars easy to be understood; when otherwise you will be like a stopped or narrow-mouthed bottle, that keepeth out that which you desire to put in. I know that understanding must go before the affections; but yet the understanding of the concernments⁵ and worth of your own souls must first procure such a serious care of your salvation, and a general regard to the Word of God, as is needful to your further understanding of the particular instructions, which you shall hear afterwards.

Direction 4: Suffer not vain thoughts or drowsy negligence to hinder your attention.

If you mark not⁶ what is taught you, how should you understand and learn? Set yourselves to it, as for your lives. Be as earnest and diligent in attending and learning as you would have the preacher be in teaching (Pro 4:1-20, 5:1, 7:24). [Do] not [allow] in thoughts or drowsy negligence to hinder your attention. If a drowsy, careless preacher be bad, a drowsy, careless hearer is no good. Saith Moses, "Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day...For it is not a vain thing for you; because it is your life" (Deu 32:46-47). You would have God attentive to your prayers in your distresses, and why will you not be attentive to his words when the prayers of him are abominable to God that turneth away his hear from hearing the law (Pro 28:9)? All the people were very attentive to hear Christ (Luk 19:48). When Ezra read the Law from morning till mid-day, the ears of all the people were attentive to it (Neh 8:3). When Paul continued his Lord's Day exercise and

³ **divinity** – theology.

⁴ **heed** – care; attention.

⁵ **concernments** – concerns; interests.

⁶ **mark not** – do not consider.

speech until midnight, one young man that fell asleep did fall down dead as a warning to them that will sleep when they should hear the message of Christ (Act 20:9). Therefore you are excused that day from worldly business that you may attend on the Lord without distraction (1Co 7:35). Lydia's attending to the words of Paul accompanied the opening of her heart and her conversion (Act 16:14).

Direction 5: Mark especially the design, drift, and principal doctrine of the sermon.

Both because that is the chief thing that the preacher would have marked;⁷ and because the understanding of that will much help you to understand all the rest which dependeth on it and relateth to it.

Direction 6: Mark most those things which are of greatest weight and concernment to your souls.

And do not fix upon some little sayings and by-discourses⁸ or witty sentences, like children that bring home some scraps and words which they do but play with.

Direction 7: Learn first your catechisms⁹ at home and the great essential points of religion contained in the creed,¹⁰ the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments.

And in your hearing first labor to get a clearer understanding of these; and then the lesser branches which grow out of these will be the better understood.

You can scarce bestow too much care and pains in learning these great essential points. It is the most fruitful of all your studies. Two things further I here advise you to avoid: 1) The hasty climbing up to smaller points (which some call higher) before you have well received these, and the receiving of those higher points, independently, without their due respect, to these which they depend upon. 2) The feeding upon dry and barren controversies, and delighting in the chaff of jingling words,¹¹ and impertinent,¹² unedifying¹³ things, or discourses about formalities and circumstances.

⁷ **marked** – focused on; considered.

⁸ **by-discourses** – unessential subjects addressed in a sermon.

⁹ **catechisms** – books of doctrinal instruction by means of questions and answers, frequently with supporting Scripture passages referenced.

¹⁰ **the creed** – the Apostle's Creed.

¹¹ **chaff of jingling words** – words which draw attention but are not substantial.

¹² **impertinent** – irrelevant.

¹³ **unedifying** – that which does not build up.

Direction 8: Meditate on what you hear when you come home till you better understand it (Psa 1:2).

Direction 9: Where you doubt, inquire of those that can resolve [your doubts] and teach you.

It sheweth a careless mind and a contempt of the Word of God in most people and servants that [they] never come to ask the resolution of one doubt, from one week's or year's end to another, though they have pastors or masters that have ability, and leisure, and willingness to help them. When Christ was alone, they that were about him with the twelve asked Him the meaning of His parable (Mar 4:10).

Direction 10: Read much those holy books which treat best of the doctrine which you would understand.

Direction 11: Pray earnestly for wisdom and the illumination of the Spirit (Eph 1:18; Act 26:18; Jam 1:5).

Direction 12: Conscientious practicing what you know is an excellent help to understanding (Joh 7:17).

2. Directions for Remembering What You Hear

That loss of memory which cometh from age and decay of nature is not to be cured; nor should any servant of Christ be overmuch troubled at it, seeing Christ will no more cast off his servants for that, than He will for age or any sickness. But for that want of memory which is curable and is a fault, I shall give you these directions following.

Direction 1: It greatly helpeth memory to have a full understanding of the matter spoken, which you would remember.

And ignorance is one of the greatest hindrances to memory. Common experience telleth you this. How easily you can remember any discourse which you thoroughly understand (for your very knowledge by invention¹⁴ will revive your memory); and how hard it is to remember any words which are insignificant or which we understand not. Therefore labor most for a clear understanding according to the last directions.

¹⁴ **invention** – perhaps discovery or imagination.

Direction 2: A deep, awakened affection is a very powerful help to memory.

We easily remember anything which our estates or lives lie¹⁵ on, when trifles are neglected and soon forgotten. Therefore labor to get all into your hearts, according to the next following directions.

Direction 3: Method is a very great help to memory.

Therefore be acquainted with the preacher's method;¹⁶ and then you are put into a path or tract, which you cannot easily go out of. And therefore it is, that ministers must not only be methodical, and avoid prolix,¹⁷ confused, and involved discourses, and that malicious pride of hiding their method, but must be as oft in the use of the same method as the subject will bear, and choose that method which is most easy to the hearers to understand and remember, and labor to make them perceive your tract.¹⁸

Direction 4: Numbers are a great help to memory.

As when the reasons, the uses, the motives, the signs, the directions, be six, or seven, or eight—when you know the exact number—it helpeth you much to remember which was the first, second, third, etc.

Direction 5: Names also and signal words are a great help to memory.

He may remember one word that cannot remember all the sentence; and that one word may help him to remember much of the rest. Therefore preachers should contrive the force of every reason, use, and direction, as much as may be, into some one emphatical¹⁹ word.

And some do very profitably contrive each of those words to begin with the same letter, which is good for memory, just so it be not too much strained, and put them not upon greater inconveniences. For example, I might direct you to the chief helps to your salvation and name 1) Powerful preaching, 2) Prayer, 3) Prudence, 4) Piety, 5) Painfulness,²⁰ 6) Patience, 7) Perseverance. Though I opened every one of these at large, the very names would help the hearers' memory. It is this that maketh ministers that care more for their people's souls than the pleasing of curious ears, to

¹⁵ **lie** – depend.

¹⁶ **method** – structure or logical order the preacher uses in presenting his sermons.

¹⁷ **prolix** – verbose, overly wordy.

¹⁸ **tract** – view, perspective, treatment.

¹⁹ **emphatical** – strongly expressive.

²⁰ **painfulness** – carefulness.

go in the common road of doctrine, reason, uses, motives, helps, etc., and to give their uses the same titles of information, reproof, exhortation, etc.²¹ And yet when the subject shall direct us to some other method, the hearers must not be offended with us: for one method will not serve exactly for every subject, and we must be loath²² to wrong the text or matter.

Direction 6: It is a great help to memory in the time of hearing to often call over and repeat to yourselves the names or heads that have been spoken.

The mind of man can do two things at once. You may both hear what is said and recall and repeat to yourselves what is past; not to stand long upon it, but oft and quickly to name over, for example, the reasons, uses, motives, etc. To me, this hath been (next to understanding and affection) the greatest help of any that I have used; for otherwise to hear a head²³ but once, and think of it no more till the sermon is done, would never serve my turn to keep it.²⁴

Direction 7: Grasp not at more than you are able to hold, lest thereby you lose all.

If there be more particulars than you can possibly remember, lay hold on some which most concern you, and let the rest go; perhaps another may rather take up those, which you leave behind. Yet say not that it is the preacher's fault to name more than you can carry away: for 1) Then he must leave out his enlargement much more, and the most of his sermon; for it is likely you leave the most behind. 2) Another may remember more than you. 3) All is not lost when the words are forgotten; for it may breed a habit of understanding and promote resolution, affection, and practice.

Direction 8: Writing is an easy help for memory, to those that can use it.

Some question whether they should use it, because it hindereth their affection. But that must be differently determined according to the difference of subjects and of hearers. Some sermons are all to work upon the affections at present, and the present advantage is to be preferred before the after perusal;²⁵ but some must more profit us in after digestion and review. And some hearers can write much with ease, and little hinder their affection; and some write so little and are hindered so much,

²¹ A conscientious minister will present his message in a simple, straightforward manner.

²² **loath** – unwilling.

²³ **head** – point in a sermon.

²⁴ **serve my turn to keep it** – serve my purpose for it to be remembered.

²⁵ **perusal** – careful examination; study.

that it recompenseth not their loss.²⁶ Some know so fully all that is said, that they need no notes; and some that are ignorant need them for perusal.

Direction 9: Peruse what you remember, or write down, when you come home, and fix it speedily before it is lost, and hear others that can repeat it better.

Pray it over, and confer of it with others.

Direction 10: If you forget the very words, yet remember the main drift of all, and get those resolutions and affections which they drive at.

And then you have not lost the sermon, though you have lost the words; as he hath not lost his food, that hath digested it, and turned it into flesh and blood.

3. Directions for Holy Resolutions and Affections in Hearing

The understanding and memory are but the passage to the heart, and the practice is but the expression of the heart; therefore how to work upon the heart is the principal business.

Direction 1: Live under the most convincing, lively, serious preacher that possibly you can.

It is a matter of great concernment²⁷ to all, but especially to dull and senseless hearts. Harken not to that earthly generation that tell you, because God can bless the weakest, and because it is your own fault if you profit not by the weakest, that therefore you should make no difference but sit down under an ignorant, dumb, or senseless man. Find out first whether they had as willingly have a bad servant, or a bad physician as a good one, because God can bless the labors of the weakest? Find out whether they would not have their children duly reprov'd or corrected because it is their own faults that they need it? And whether they would not take physic after a surfeit²⁸ though it be their own fault that made them sick? It is true that all our sin is our own fault; but the question is, What is the most effectual cure? What man that is alive and awake doth not feel a very great difference between a dead and a lively preacher?

Direction 2: Remember that ministers are the messengers of Christ and come to you on His business and in His name.

²⁶ **recompenseth not their loss** – they do not gain more than they lose.

²⁷ **concernment** – importance.

²⁸ **surfeit** – gluttonous indulgence.

Hear them therefore as His officers, and as men that have more to do with God Himself, than with the speaker (2Cor 6:1). It is the phrase of the Holy Ghost, “All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4:13). It is God with Whom you have to do, and therefore accordingly behave yourselves (Luk 10:16; 1Th 4:8; 1Co 4:1).

Direction 3: Remember that this God is instructing you, and warning you, and treating²⁹ with you, about no less than the saving of your souls.

Come therefore to hear as for your salvation. Can that heart be dull that well considereth that it is heaven and hell that is the matter that God is treating with him about?

Direction 4: Remember that you have but a little time to hear in; and you know not whether ever you shall hear again.

Hear therefore as if it were your last. Think when you hear the calls of God and the offers of grace, I know not but this may be my last: how would I hear if I were sure to die tomorrow? I am sure it will be ere long and may be today for aught I know.

Direction 5: Remember that all these days and sermons must be reviewed.

You must answer for all that you have heard, whether you heard it with love, or with unwillingness and weariness; with diligent attention or with carelessness; and the Word which you hear shall judge you at the last day. Hear therefore as those that are going to judgment to give account of their hearing and obeying (Joh 12:48).

Direction 6: Make it your work with diligence to apply the Word as you are hearing it, and to work your own hearts to those suitable resolutions and affections which it bespeaketh.³⁰

Cast not all upon the minister, as those that will go no further than they are carried as by force. This is fitter for the dead than for the living. You have work to do as well as the preacher, and should all the while be as busy as he. As helpless as the infant is, he must suck when the mother offereth him the breast. If you must be fed, yet you must open your mouths, and digest it, for another cannot digest it for you. Nor can the holiest, wisest, most powerful minister convert or save you without yourselves, nor deliver a people from sin and hell, that will not stir for their own

²⁹ **treating** – dealing.

³⁰ **bespeaketh** – addresses.

deliverance. Therefore be all the while at work, and abhor an idle heart in hearing as well as an idle minister.³¹

Direction 7: Chew the cud,³² and call up all when you come home in secret, and by meditation preach it over to yourselves.

If it were coldly delivered by the preacher, do you consider the great weight of the matter and preach it more earnestly over to your own hearts. You should love yourselves best and best be acquainted with your own condition and necessities.

Direction 8: Pray it over all to God, and there lament a stupid³³ heart, and put up your complaints to heaven against it.

The name and presence of God hath a quickening and awaking power.

Direction 9: Go to Christ by faith for the quickenings³⁴ of His Spirit.

Your life is hid in Him, your root and head; and from Him all must be conveyed. He that hath the Son hath life; and because He liveth, we shall live also. Entreat Him to glorify the power of His resurrection by raising the dead, and to open your hearts, and speak to you by His Spirit, that you may be taught of God, and your hearts may be His epistles,³⁵ and the tables where the everlasting Law is written (Col 3:3-4; Joh 15:1-5; 11:25; 14:19; Phi 3:7, 8; Act 16:14; Joh 6:45; 2Co 3:3, 6, 17, 18; Heb 8:10; 10:16; Jer 31:33).

Direction 10: Make conscience of teaching and provoking³⁶ others.

Pity the souls of the ignorant about you. God often blesseth the grace that is most improved in doing Him service; and our stock is like the woman's oil, which increased as long as she poured out, and was gone when she stopped (1Ki 17:12, 14, 16). Doing good is the best way for receiving good. He that in pity to a poor man that is almost starved will but fall to rubbing him, shall get himself heat, and both be gainers.

4. Directions to Bring What You Hear into Practice

³¹ Compare Act 2:40; Phi 2:12-18; Heb 2:1.

³² **chew the cud** – referring to the digestion of ruminating animals, like cows, that first chew and swallow their food and then regurgitate it and repeat the process.

³³ **stupid** – dull.

³⁴ **quickenings** – life giving activity.

³⁵ **epistles** – letters.

³⁶ **provoking** – in this context, stirring up or encouraging.

Without this the rest is vain or counterfeit, and therefore somewhat must be said to this.

Direction 1: Be acquainted with the failings of your hearts and lives, and come on purpose to get directions and helps against those particular failings.

You will not know what medicine you need, much less how to use it, if you know not what aileth you. Know what duties you omit or carelessly perform, and know what sins you are most guilty of, and say when you go out of doors, I go to Christ for physic for my own disease. I hope to hear something before I come back, which may help me more against this sin, and fit me better for my duty, or provoke me more effectually.³⁷ Are those men like to practice Christ's directions that either know not their disease or love it and would not have it cured?

Direction 2: The three aforementioned are still presupposed, namely, that the Word have first done its part upon your understandings, memory, and hearts.

For that Word cannot be practiced which is not understood, nor at all remembered, nor hath procured resolutions and affections. It is the due work upon the heart that must prevail for the reformation of the life.

Direction 3: When you understand what it is in point of practice that the preacher driveth at, observe especially the uses and the moving³⁸ reasons, and plead them with your own hearts; and let conscience be preaching over all that the minister preacheth to you.

You take them to be soul-murderers that silence able, faithful preachers, and also those preachers that silence themselves, and feed not the flock committed to their care; and do you think it a small matter to silence your own conscience, which must be the preacher that must set home all, before it can come to resolution or practice? Keep conscience all the while at work, preaching over all that to your hearts, which you hear with your ears; and urge yourselves to a speedy resolution. Remember that the whole body of divinity is practical in its end and tendency, and therefore be not a mere notional³⁹ hearer; but consider every word you hear, what practice it is that it tendeth to, and place that deepest in your memory. If you forget all the words of the reasons and motives which you hear, be sure to remember what practice they were

³⁷ **effectually** – effectively.

³⁸ **moving** – motivating.

³⁹ **notional** – speculative; theoretical.

brought to urge you to. As if you heard a sermon against uncharitableness,⁴⁰ censoriousness,⁴¹ or hurting others, though you should forget all the reasons and motives in particular, yet still remember that you were convinced in the hearing, that censorious and hurtful uncharitableness is a great sin, and that you heard reason enough to make you resolve it. And let conscience preach out the sermon to the end, and not let it die in bare conviction; but resolve, and be past wavering before you stir. And, above all the [rest of the] sermon, remember the directions and helps for practice with which the truest method⁴² usually shuts up⁴³ the sermon.

Direction 4: When you come home, let conscience in secret also repeat the sermon to you.

Between God and yourselves, consider what there was delivered to you in the Lord's message that your souls were most concerned in. What sin was reproved which you are guilty of? What duty pressed which you omit? And there meditate seriously on the weight and reasons of the thing; and resist not the light, but yet bring all to a fixed resolution, if till then you were unresolved. Do not ensnare yourselves with dangerous vows about things doubtful,⁴⁴ or peremptory vows without dependence on Christ for strength, but firmly resolving and cautiously engaging yourselves to duty, not with carnal evasions and reserves, but with humble dependence upon grace, without which of yourselves you are able to do nothing.

Direction 5: Hear the most practical preachers you can well get.

Not those that have the finest notions, or the cleanest style, or neatest words; but those that are still urging you to holiness of heart and life, and driving home every truth to practice. Not that false doctrine will at all bear up a holy life, but true doctrine must not be left in the porch, or at the doors, but be brought home and used to its proper end, and seated in the heart, and placed as the poise⁴⁵ upon the clock, where it may set all the wheels in motion.

⁴⁰ **uncharitableness** – lack of love.

⁴¹ **censoriousness** – engaging in sinful accusation.

⁴² **truest method** – most appropriate approach of presentation.

⁴³ **shuts up** – completes.

⁴⁴ **doubtful** – uncertain.

⁴⁵ **poise** – counterweight.

Direction 6: Take heed especially of two sorts of false teachers: antinomian⁴⁶ libertines, and autonomian⁴⁷ Pharisees.

The first would build their sins on Christ: not pleading for sin itself, but taking down many of the chief helps against it. Disarming us of the weapons by which it should be destroyed, they reproach the true preachers of obedience as legalists that preach up works and call men to doing when they preach up obedience to Christ their King, upon the terms and by the motives which are used by Christ Himself, and his apostles. Not understanding aright the true doctrine of faith in Christ, and justification, and free-grace (which they think none else understand but they), they pervert it and make it an enemy to the kingly office of Christ, and to sanctification, and the necessary duties of obedience.

The other sort do make void the commandments of God by their traditions. Instead of the holy practice of the laws of Christ, they would drive the world with fire and sword to practice all their superstitious fopperies,⁴⁸ so that the few plain and necessary precepts of the Law of the universal King are drowned in the greater body of their canon law, and the ceremonies of the pope's imposing are so many in comparison of the institutions of Christ, that the worship of God and work of Christianity is corrupted by it, and made as another thing. The wheat is lost in a heap of chaff by them that will be law-givers to themselves and to all the church of Christ.

Direction 7: Associate yourselves with the most holy, serious, practical Christians.

Not with the ungodly, nor with barren opinionists, that talk of nothing but their controversies, and the way or interest of their sects (which they call the church), nor with outside formal ceremonious Pharisees, that are pleading for the washing of cups, and tithing of mint, and the tradition of their fathers, while they hate and persecute Christ and His disciples. But walk with the most holy, and blameless, and charitable, that live upon that truth which others talk of, and are seeking to please God by the wisdom which is first pure, and then peaceable and gentle (Jam 3:17-18), when others are contending for their several sects, or seeking to please Christ by killing Him, censuring Him, or slandering Him in His servants (Joh 16:2-3; Mat 25:40, 45).

⁴⁶ **antinomian** – from the Greek *anti*, against, and *nomos*, law; generally refers to those who hold the theological view that God's Law has no place in the life of a believer.

⁴⁷ **autonomian** – from the Greek *autos*, self, and *nomos*, law; describing those who add laws of their own to the righteous standard of God's Law; Baxter uses this uncommon term to refer to Roman Catholics and possibly others.

⁴⁸ **fopperies** – showy foolishness.

Direction 8: Keep a just account of your practice.

Examine yourselves in the end of every day and week, how you have spent your time and practiced what you were taught, and judge yourselves before God according as you find it.

Yea, you must call yourselves to account every hour, what you are doing, and how you do it; whether you are upon God's work, or not. Your hearts must be watched and followed like unfaithful servants, and like loitering scholars, and driven on to every duty, like a dull or tired horse (1Co 9:24-27).

Direction 9: Above all set your hearts to the deepest contemplations of the wonderful love of God in Christ, and the sweetness and excellency of a holy life, and the certain incomprehensible glory which it tendeth to, that your souls may be in love with your dear Redeemer, and all that is holy, and love and obedience may be natural to you.

And then the practice of holy doctrine will be easy to you, when it is your delight.

Direction 10: Take heed that you receive not ungrounded or unnecessary prejudices against the person of the preacher.

For that will turn your heart and lock it up against the doctrine. And therefore abhor the spirit of uncharitableness, cruelty, and faction, which always bendeth⁴⁹ to the suppressing, or vilifying and disgracing all those that are not of their way and for their interest. And be not so blind as not to observe that the very design of the devil in raising up divisions among Christians is that he may use the tongues or hands of one another to vilify them all, to make them odious to one another, and to disable one another from hindering his kingdom and doing any considerable service to Christ. So that when a minister of Christ should be winning souls, either he is forbidden, or he is despised, and the hearers are saying, "O, he is such, or such a one," according to the names of reproach which the enemy of Christ and love hath taught them.

II. Directions for Profitably Reading the Holy Scriptures

The diversity of men's tempers and understandings is so exceedingly great that it is impossible that anything should be pleasing and suitable to some which shall not

⁴⁹ **bendeth** – tends.

be disliked and quarreled with by others. Also in the Scriptures there are many things hard to be understood, which the unlearned and unstable wrest to their own destruction (2Pe 3:16); and the word is to some the savor of death unto death (Mar 4:24; 2Co 2:16). You have therefore need to be careful in reading it. As Christ saith, “Take heed therefore how ye hear” (Luk 8:18), so I say, Take heed how you read.

Direction 1: Bring not an evil heart of unbelief. Open the Bible with holy reverence as the book of God, indited⁵⁰ by the Holy Ghost.

Remember that the doctrine of the New Testament was revealed by the Son of God, Who was purposely sent from heaven to be the light of the world and to make known to men the will of God and the matters of their salvation. Bethink⁵¹ you well, if God should but send a book or letter to you by an angel, how reverently would you receive it? How carefully you would peruse it and regard it above all the books in the world? And how much rather should you do so, by that book which is indited by the Holy Ghost and recordeth the doctrine of Christ Himself, Whose authority is greater than all the angels? Read it not therefore as a common book, with a common and unreverent heart; but in the dread and love of God the author.

Direction 2: Remember that it is the very Law of God which you must live by and be judged by at last. And therefore read with a full resolution to obey whatever it commandeth, though flesh, and men, and devils contradict it.

Let there be no secret exceptions in your heart to balk at any of its precepts and shift off that part of obedience which the flesh accounteth difficult or dear.⁵²

Direction 3: Remember that it is the will and testament of your Lord and the covenant of most full and gracious promises, which all your comforts and all your hopes of pardon and everlasting life are built upon. Read it therefore with love and great delight.

Value it a thousand-fold more than you would do the letters of your dearest friend or the deeds by which you hold your lands, or anything else of low concernment. If the Law was sweeter to David than honey, and better than thousands of gold and silver, and was his delight and meditation all the day, O what should the sweet and precious gospel be to us!

⁵⁰ **indited** – written.

⁵¹ **bethink** – reflect.

⁵² **dear** – costly.

Direction 4: Remember that it is a doctrine of unseen things and of the greatest mysteries; and therefore come not to it with arrogance as a judge, but with humility as a learner or disciple. And if anything seem difficult or improbable to you, suspect your own unfurnished understanding and not the sacred Word of God.

If a learner in any art or science will suspect his teacher and his books whenever he is stalled or meeteth with that which seemeth unlikely to him, his pride would keep possession for⁵³ his ignorance, and his folly were like to be incurable.

Direction 5: Remember that it is a universal law and doctrine, written for the most ignorant as well as for the curious; and therefore must be suited in plainness to the capacity of the simple and yet have matter to exercise the most subtle wits. God would have the style to savor more of the innocent weakness of the instruments than the matter.⁵⁴

Therefore be not offended or troubled when the style doth seem less polite⁵⁵ than you might think beseemed the Holy Ghost; nor [be troubled] at the plainness of some parts or the mysteriousness of others, but adore the wisdom and tender condescension of God to His poor creatures.

Direction 6: Bring not a carnal mind, which savoreth only fleshly things and is enslaved to those sins which the Scripture doth condemn.

For the carnal mind is enmity against God, and neither is, nor can be subject to His Law (Rom 8:7-8). And the things of God are not discerned by the mere natural man, for they are foolishness to him, and they must be spiritually discerned (2Co 2:14); and enmity is an ill expositor. It will be quarrelling with all and making faults in the Word which findeth so many faults in you. It will hate that Word which cometh to deprive you of your most sweet and dearly beloved sin. Or, if you have such a carnal mind and enmity, believe it not, any more than a partial and wicked enemy should be believed against God Himself, Who better understandeth what He hath written, than any of His foolish enemies.

Direction 7: Compare one place of Scripture with another, and expound the darkest by the help of the plainest, and the fewer expressions by the more frequent and

⁵³ **keep possession for** – protect; preserve.

⁵⁴ In inspiring the human authors of Scripture the Holy Spirit presents God's infinitely glorious truth in the forms of finite human expression, but without error or compromise.

⁵⁵ **polite** – refined; polished.

ordinary, and the more doubtful points by those which are most certain; and not on the contrary.

Direction 8: Presume not on the strength of your own understanding, but humbly pray to God for light. Before and after you read the Scripture, pray earnestly that the Spirit which did indite it may expound it to you and keep you from unbelief and error and lead you into the truth (1Co 2:10, 12; 12:8-10).

Direction 9: Read some of the best annotations⁵⁶ or expositors, who being better acquainted with the phrase of Scripture than yourselves, may help to clear your understanding. When Philip asked the eunuch that read Isaiah 53, “Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me?” (Act 8:30-31). Make use of your guides, if you would not err.

Direction 10: When you are stalled by any difficulty which over-matcheth⁵⁷ you, note it down, and propound it to your pastor and crave his help, or (if the minister of the place be ignorant and unable) go to someone that God hath furnished for such work.

And if, after all, some things remain still dark and difficult, remember your imperfection, and wait on God for further light, and thankfully make use of all the rest of the Scripture which is plain. And do not think as the papists,⁵⁸ that men must forbear reading it for fear of erring, any more than that men must forbear eating for fear of poison, or subjects must be kept ignorant of the laws of the king for fear of misunderstanding or abusing them.

III. Directions for Reading Other Books.

Because God hath made the excellent, holy writings of His servants the singular blessing of this land and age,⁵⁹ and many an one may have a good book even any day or hour of the week, that cannot at all have a good preacher, I advise all God's servants to be thankful for so great a mercy, and to make use of it, and be much in reading.

⁵⁶ **annotations** – commentaries.

⁵⁷ **over-matcheth you** – is beyond your comprehension.

⁵⁸ **papists** – those devoted to the pope; Roman Catholics.

⁵⁹ The Puritans, in the era during which the author wrote, produced a tremendous wealth of books on doctrinal and practical themes.

Reading with most doth more conduce to⁶⁰ knowledge than hearing doth, because you may choose what subjects and the most excellent treatises you please; and may be often at it, and may peruse again and again what you forget, and may take time as you go to fix it on your mind. With very many it doth more than hearing also to move the heart—though hearing of itself in this hath the advantage—because lively books may be more easily had than lively preachers. Especially these sorts of men should be much in reading:

1. Masters of families⁶¹ that have more souls to care for than their own.
2. People that live where there is no preaching, or as bad or worse than none.
3. Poor people, servants, and children that are forced on many Lord's Days to stay at home whilst others have the opportunity to hear.
4. Vacant⁶² persons that have more leisure than others have.

To all these, but especially masters of families, I shall here give a few directions.

Direction 1: I presuppose that you keep the devil's books out of your hands and house.

I mean cards, and idle tales, and play-books, and romances or love-books, and false, bewitching stories, and the seducing books of all false teachers, and the railing or scorning books which the men of several sects and factions write against each other, on purpose to teach men to hate one another, and banish love. For where these are suffered to corrupt the mind, all grave and useful writings are forestalled.⁶³ And it is a wonder to see how powerfully these poison the minds of children and many other empty heads. Also books that are written by the sons of Korah (Num 16), to breed distastes and discontents in the minds of the people against their governors, both magistrates and ministers. For there is something in the best rulers for the tongues of seditious men to fasten on and to aggravate in the people's ears; and there is something even in godly people which tempteth them too easily to take fire and be distempered before they are aware; and they foresee not the evil to which it tendeth.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ **conduce to** – contribute to; lead to.

⁶¹ **masters of families** – heads of households; usually men as husbands and fathers.

⁶² **vacant** – unoccupied; free.

⁶³ **forestalled** – obstructed; hindered.

⁶⁴ The application of this paragraph to undiscerning use of twenty-first century media (such as television, movies, internet, and some news sources) is one that Christians in our day should seriously consider.

Direction 2: When you read to your family or others, let it be seasonably and gravely, when silence and attendance encourage you to expect success, and not when children are crying or talking, or servants bustling to disturb you. Distraction is worst in the greatest businesses.

*Direction 3: Choose such books as are most suitable to your state or to those you read to.*⁶⁵

It is worse than unprofitable to read books for comforting troubled minds to those that are blockishly secure and have hardened, obstinate, unhumiliated hearts. It is as bad as to give medicines or plasters contrary to the patient's need, and such as cherish the disease. So is it to read books of too high a style or subject to dull and ignorant hearers. We often say, "That which is one man's meat, is another man's poison." It is not enough that the matter be good, but it must be agreeable to the case for which it is used.

*Direction 4: To a common family, begin with those books which at once inform the judgment about the fundamentals and awaken the affections to entertain⁶⁶ them and improve⁶⁷ them, such as are treatises of regeneration, conversion, or repentance.*⁶⁸

Direction 5: Next to these, read over those books which are more suited to the state of young Christians for their growth in grace, and for their exercise of faith, and love, and obedience, and for the mortifying⁶⁹ of selfishness, pride, sensuality, worldliness, and the other most dangerous sins.

Direction 6: At the same time labour to methodize your knowledge, and to that end read first and learn some short catechism,⁷⁰ and then some larger. And let the catechism be kept in memory while you live, and the rest be thoroughly understood.

⁶⁵ Saith Aristippus, [quoted by] Diogenes Laertius, "As they are not the healthfulest that eat most so are they not the most learned that read most; but they that read that which is most necessary and profitable."

⁶⁶ **entertain** – receive; keep.

⁶⁷ **improve** – apply.

⁶⁸ After this and the following "Directions" the author listed applicable books available in his day for suggested reading, which we have omitted.

⁶⁹ **mortifying** – putting to death.

⁷⁰ Short catechisms include *Spurgeon's Catechism*, *Gadsby's Catechism*, and *A Catechism for Boys and Girls*, available as booklets from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

Direction 7: Next read (to yourselves or families) the larger expositions of the Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Ten Commandments. That your understanding may be more full, particular, and distinct; and your families may not stop in generalities, which are not understood.

Direction 8: Read much those books which direct you in a course of daily communion with God, and ordering all your conversations.⁷¹

Direction 9: [Read books which cultivate] peace, and comfort, and increase of the love of God.

Direction 10: [Read commentaries] for the understanding of the text of Scripture.

Direction 11: [Read books which secure] you against the fever of uncharitable zeal and schism, and contentious wranglings and cruelties for religion sake.

Direction 12: [Read books] for establishing you against Popery, on the soundest grounds, not running in the contrary extreme.

Direction 13: [Read books which prepare you] for affliction, sufferings, sickness, and death.



⁷¹ **conversations** – interactions with others either in speech or action.