



Truth

On Tough Texts

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Ten Books Every Christian Should Read

ENTERING A GOOGLE SEARCH SUCH AS “TOP 10 Christian books,” “10 books every Christian should read,” or similar criteria, yields some frightening results. You get lists that include such titles as: *The Purpose Driven Life* (Warren), *The Shack* (Young), even *Velvet Elvis* (Bell). An entry on one list, in fact, almost gave me an embolism: *The Faith of Barack Obama* (Mansfield). There are, of course, some good recommendations: *Basic Christianity* (Stott), *My Utmost for His Highest* (Chambers), and *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Bunyan).

In the final analysis, however, most entries on such lists today are weak at best, typically trendy, subjective, and experiential. What I would like to offer in this brief departure from our usual TOTT emphasis is a list of what I believe is at least better. It would certainly be presumptuous, if not downright arrogant, to claim this to be definitive. Many solid men of God could offer lists better than this one.

What I’ve tried to present here, therefore, is a collection that offers a solid foundation for every Christian, including both classic and contemporary titles. I have aimed for a wide range of content from doctrinal, devotional, and even polemic to help in solidly grounding the reader. The order is not mandatory, but I have tried to start with the basics and go up from there—from *milk* to *meat*. I pray this list will prove helpful. If so, we would love to hear from you.

1. *Know What You Believe* Paul Little

In a day when doctrine is increasingly challenged and regarded as irrelevant, divisive, and counterproductive, it is all the more critical that Christians be rooted and grounded in biblical truth. Paul Little’s book (InterVarsity) is a contemporary classic. It lays the foundation stones for ten key doctrines of Scripture, each in its own chapter: the Bible; God; Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ’s death; People and Sin; the Holy Spirit;

Salvation; Angels, Satan, and Demons; the Church; Things to Come. It also includes study questions for each chapter. In an easy to read style, Little presents the basic truths of the Christian faith that are crucial for the believer.

2. *The Holiness of God* R. C. Sproul

The best book to come from R. C. Sproul’s pen (in my humble opinion) is another contemporary classic (Tyndale). As Puritan Thomas Watson wrote, “Holiness is the most sparkling jewel of His crown; it is the name by which God is known.” We, therefore, put Sproul’s book before the third book in our list. If we do not grasp the holiness of God, we will grasp virtually nothing else about Him. The chapter “The Insanity of Luther” is a masterpiece in itself. Others include: “The Trauma of Holiness”; “Holy Justice”; “War and Peace with a Holy God”; “Be Holy Because I Am Holy”; and others. While most books written today focus on man, this one focuses on God, specifically providing us, as one online description well puts it, “an accessible exploration of history and Scripture that will help you understand—and live with—the tension between God’s terrifying holiness and His inexplicable grace.” One of the greatest tragedies of our day is we have lost our reverence, respect, and awe for God, and Sproul powerfully challenges us to rediscover who God is.

3. *Knowing God* J. I. Packer

Continuing with the laying of a solid foundation, Packer’s book has become still another modern classic, first published in 1973 (InterVarsity). In my humble opinion again, if this book is absent from any top 10 list, such a list is fatally flawed. Delving even deeper into knowing our God, it not only provides us with information *about* God—such as His

nature and attributes—but goes deeper in helping us to know *God*, drawing us closer to Him in love and worship. As Packer writes, “One can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of Him” (p. 26). R. C. Sproul calls this a “masterpiece by a master theologian . . . It serves as a wakeup call to those who are asleep to the majesty of God.” While many mystic-prone people today think they can know God intuitively, knowing God depends solely on God’s revelation of Himself through His Word, and it is to there alone Packer goes to explain who God has proclaimed Himself to be. I have seen many books on this subject—some good, others not so much—but Packer’s continues to be a step above all the others. While Packer has sadly taken a misstep on a couple of issues in recent years, these do not diminish the power of this book in any way.

4. The Sovereignty of God A. W. Pink

What more can be said of Pink’s *magnum opus* than hasn’t already been conveyed by many a reviewer? Early in his presentation, Pink observes:

Today to make mention of God’s sovereignty is, in many quarters, to speak in an unknown tongue. Were we to announce from the average pulpit that the subject of our discourse would be the sovereignty of God, it would sound very much as though we had borrowed a phrase from one of the dead languages. Alas! That it should be so. Alas! That the doctrine which is the key to history, the interpreter of Providence, the warp and woof of Scripture, and the foundation of Christian theology, should be so sadly neglected and so little understood (Baker edition, p. 20).

Pink wrote that in 1918, and how much truer it is today! What was once a grand theme and the very foundation of historic Christianity, is now considered old fashioned, out of date, even offensive, Theology. Ah, today we want something practical, relevant, exciting, and most of all man-centered.

In a sense, sovereignty itself is the very definition of God. If God is not absolutely sovereign, He is not God at all. To say that God is sovereign, in fact, is to say that God *is* God! Pink again makes his theme clear early on:

Who is regulating affairs on this earth today—God, or the Devil? What saith the Scriptures? If we believe their plain and positive declarations, no room is left for uncertainty. They affirm, again and again, that God is on the throne of the universe; that the scepter is in His hands; that He is directing *all things* “after the counsel of His own will.” They affirm, not only that God created all things, but also that God is ruling and reigning over all the works of His hands. They affirm that God is the “Almighty,” that His will is irreversible, that He is absolute sovereign in every realm of all His vast dominions. And surely it *must* be so. Only two alternatives are possible: God must either rule, or be ruled; sway, or be swayed; accomplish His own will, or be thwarted by His creatures. (p. 14, emphasis Pink’s)

After defining God’s sovereignty in Chapter 1, subsequent chapters develop this theme in: Creation, Administration, Sal-

vation, and Operation. Pink also addresses “problems” with this doctrine in chapters on God’s Sovereignty and the Human Will, Human Responsibility, Prayer, and Other Difficulties and Objections. The Baker Book House edition is the original, unabridged version. Banner of Truth Trust has published an edited version, but in my opinion, it severely damages the work. (*You can download this title in PDF format free from our website.*)

Pink’s classic without question rattle’s many a reader’s cage. It certainly did mine in my Arminian days. But for the reader who has “a heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear” (Deut. 29:4; cf. Isa. 6:10; Jer. 5:21; Matt. 13:15–16) this work of art will present the irrefutable truth of *The Sovereignty of God*. That leads us to our next title.

5. Foundations of Grace Steven Lawson

While some teachers insist that the Doctrines of Grace are “a twisting of Scripture” or are a teaching that is simply “based upon a few isolated proof texts,” there is in reality nothing that permeates the Bible more than these doctrines, doctrines that proclaim God’s sovereign grace. From Genesis to Revelation, in literally hundreds of verses, these doctrines call, capture, and command our attention.

That is the theme of Dr. Steve Lawson’s *Foundations of Grace* (Reformation Trust). I recently recommended this book to a friend and colleague who had not yet heard of it. The next time we talked his first comment was that next to the Bible this was his favorite book. “The teaching of sovereign grace,” Lawson writes, “literally stretches from cover to cover in the Bible” (p. 36). Beginning with Moses, moving on to the historical writers and prophets, and then marching on to the Apostles, early Church Fathers and their descendents throughout Church History, and finally up to modern defenders of the faith, the doctrines of sovereign grace are shown to be biblical and historical beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt.

This volume is actually the first of five in Lawson’s series, “A Long Line of Godly Men.” This first (*Foundations of Grace*) covers 1400 BC through AD 100, tracing the doctrines of grace throughout every book of the Bible. Volume 2 (*Pillars of Grace*) will cover the 2nd through 16th-centuries (Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin). Volume 3 (*Forces of Grace*) will cover the 16th and 17th-centuries (Knox and the Puritans). Volume 4 (*Progress of Grace*) will cover the 17th through 19th-centuries (Edwards, Warfield, Hodge, Princeton Seminary, and Shedd). Volume 5 (*Triumph of Grace*) will cover the 19th-century through the present (Spurgeon, Ryle, M’Cheyne, Kuyper, Pink, Lloyd-Jones, and MacArthur). We eagerly await each one.

6. Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace? James Boice

On June 15, 2000, God took James Montgomery Boice home to glory. He left behind some great books. His final book, however, which was actually published after his promotion, could not have been more appropriate or a more fitting

legacy. With the added subtitle *Rediscovering the Doctrines That Shook the World* (Crossway), it well addresses the contemporary church and how it has drifted far from its biblical and historical foundations.

In Part 1, Boice outlines the problem in two chapters: “The New Pragmatism” and “The Pattern of this Age.” He masterfully demonstrates how secularism, humanism, relativism, materialism, and pragmatism have not only *infiltrated* the church but have now *inundated* it (my words). It is his contention, and I think it impossible to refute him, that the church as a whole is, in virtually every area, embracing the world’s *wisdom, theology, agenda, and methods* (his words). That sets the stage for what follows.

Part 2, “The Doctrines That Shook the World,” is the heart of the book. In five chapters, Boice lays out in wonderful detail the five solas of the Reformation: “Scripture Alone” (*sola scriptura*); “Christ Alone” (*Solus Christus*); “Grace Alone” (*sola gratia*); “Faith Alone” (*sola fide*); “Glory to God Alone” (*Soli Deo Gloria*). (See TOTT # 60 and 61.)

Part 3, “The Shape of Renewal,” offers two chapters—“Reforming Our Worship” and “Reforming Our Lives”—that challenge us to renounce the “circus” atmosphere and the “what’s in it for me” attitude that pervades today’s churches and return to true Christian worship. While there are a couple of things in this section that bothered me—such as a praising of Brother Lawrence, for example—these do not diminish the pointed and powerful challenge for reformation.

7. *Awake My Heart*

J. Sidlow Baxter

Many good daily devotional books have been written through the years, but I always return to this crown jewel (Zondervan). One online product description says it well: “With over one million copies in print, *Awake My Heart* is much more than another book filled with brief daily devotions. Each page is a decidedly longer meditation with an expository and homiletical application! Baxter, one of [the 20th] century’s great preachers, will encourage and challenge you with his biblical insight and refresh you with his personal warmth. Each study offers a wealth of preaching and teaching material that can be easily shared and taught to others.”

That description is, in fact, the reason this book makes the present list. All you have to do is read any one of the entries and you will immediately see that this is not just another daily devotional. This book will supply meat for you every single day of the year. I can almost guarantee you will read it more than once.

8. *Communion With God*

John Owen

While the Puritans are wonderful (and important) to read—no one in Church History has had a higher view of God than they did, for example—they are a little inaccessible to the modern reader. That has changed, however, with a series of books from Banner of Truth Trust that has brought them to us in readable abridgments. R.J.K. Law has produced such an abridgment of one of the greatest Christian classics of all time, John Owen’s *Communion With God*. The back cover of

this 200-page, 1657 work declares:

John Owen believed that communion with God lies at the heart of the Christian life. With Paul, he recognized that through the Son we have access by the Spirit to the Father. He never lost the sense of amazement expressed by John: “Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” In this outstanding book he explains the nature of this communion and describes the many privileges it brings.

Communion with God was written in a day, like our own, when the doctrine of the Trinity was under attack and the Christian faith was being reduced either to rationalism on the one hand or mysticism on the other. His exposition shows that nothing is more vital to spiritual well-being than a practical knowledge of what this doctrine means.

Owen examines the Christian’s communion with God as it relates to all three members of the Trinity. He assures us that every Christian does have communion with God, no one is excluded, and that this communion takes place distinctly with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our relationship with

- God the Father is primarily through love and faith;
- God the Son is through fellowship and grace;
- God the Holy Spirit is primarily through comfort and sanctification.

This is an undisputed classic of Christian devotional thought that will still influence believers today who will plunge into its depths.

9. *How Should We Then Live?*

Francis A. Schaeffer

Subtitled *The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Crossway), this book is positively brilliant. Schaeffer analyzes Western civilization from ancient Rome to the Atomic Age and examines the breakdown of modern society in philosophy, theology, the arts, and morals. The only viable alternative, he argues, is living by the Christian ethic, accepting God’s revelation, and affirming the Bible’s values and meaning. This makes our list not only because of its polemic nature, but also because it greatly strengthens one’s Christian world view.

What’s particularly interesting is that while Schaeffer was writing in the mid 70s, he correctly predicted how Western society would progress based on its path in that day. American evangelicalism has been seriously tainted by the Humanism and Post-modernism that Schaeffer so well described. That leads to the final title in our list.

10. *Ashamed of the Gospel*

John MacArthur

While this book has been around since 1993, it’s now in its third edition (Crossway), and rightly so. With the wholesale takeover of the church by the modern church growth “gurus,” this book clearly and unflinchingly points out that serious error. Part of the book’s foundation is drawn from history, specifically, The Downgrade Controversy that occurred over

100 years ago in England. Charles Spurgeon saw a similar trend that he addressed very strongly in his publication, *The Sword and the Trowel*, and which ultimately compelled him to withdraw from his own Baptist fellowship, which in-turn brought its censure upon him. History often repeats itself, so it's not surprising that anyone today who dares to criticize the "status quo" is also vilified and labeled "intolerant, divisive, and unloving."

The chapter titles provide a good description of the book's content: Christianity on the Down-Grade, The User-Friendly Church, Gimme That Showtime Religion, All Things To All Men, The Foolishness of God, The Power of God Unto Salvation, Paul on Mars Hill, The Sovereignty of God in Salvation, and I Will Build My Church. At the core is the contrast between the biblical model of preaching of the true Gospel and today's abandonment of that in favor of entertainment and pragmatism.

This revised and expanded edition adds three new chapters: Interlude, Carried About By Every Wind, and Spiritual Adultery. MacArthur traces the line of pragmatic philosophy from the seeker-sensitive movement through the Emergent phenomenon, explaining why the latter is a philosophical heir of the former. He also chronicles the failure of pragmatic approaches to church growth and emphasizes the importance of evangelicals solidly committed to biblical doctrine rising to positions of leadership.

Whatever you do, don't skip the three original appendices: a history of the Downgrade Controversy (in light of history repeating itself), an exposé of Charles Finney's heresy and contribution to pragmatism in the church (history again), and an essay by Puritan Thomas Boston titled "Carnal vs. Spiritual Wisdom." There is also a new appendix: Spurgeon Speaks to Our Time.

It is sad, indeed, that books on church growth and ministry by Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, and others have all but taken the church hostage. In fact, Spurgeon laid the blame for the Downgrade at the feet of preachers: "Too many ministers are toying with the deadly cobra of 'another gospel,' in the form of modern thought" (p. 241; from "Another Word Concerning the Down-Grade," *The Sword and the Trowel*, August 1887). That's where the fault lies today. To be successful, relevant, and hip, pastors are adopting the world and jettisoning truth.

In short, *Ashamed of the Gospel* is a book that calls the church back to truth. I cannot recommend this book highly

enough for every preacher and lay person alike. If the modern trends are not stopped, I fear that there is not going to be much of the true church left in another 10–20 years.

Where To From Here?

Having built the foundation, what should you now read to shape the structure? The best encouragement I can offer is to read books that are *substantive*, not *subjective*, books that *proclaim truth*, not those that *propagate trends*, books that *exposit Scripture*, not ones that *express self*. While in each case, there are plenty of the latter, one can find the former if he looks.

For an excellent aid for your study of Scripture, for example, read *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary*, which is the entire set of Warren Wiersbe's "BE Series"—23 books on the New Testament and 27 on the Old—in a two-volume set (David C. Cook Publishing; 2,616 total pages). If you buy the set, a CD with two PDF files is also included. (What a great resource for your Kindle reader, Netbook, or laptop!)

Here are a few other recommended titles: *The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction* (Sinclair Ferguson); *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Steven Charnock); *The Cross and Truth Unchanged, Unchanging* (Martyn Lloyd-Jones); *The Beatitudes* (John MacArthur); *Voices from the Past: Puritan Devotional Readings* (Richard Rushing, Ed.); *God Tells the Man Who Cares* (A. W. Tozer). Instead of buying hard-copy books, you can legally download the following from our website for free (PDF files): *Going Deeper* (J. Sidlow Baxter); *Gleanings in the Godhead, The Attributes of God, and The Life of David* (A. W. Pink); *The Way of Life* (Charles Hodge); *The Fundamentals* (R. A. Torrey, Ed.); *Heresies Exposed* (Wm. Irvine).

Finally, the titles offered in this article are part of a larger list, "The 100 Most Essential Books for the Christian," which we will post on our website when it is complete.

May God richly bless you as you "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18).

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NEW BOOK: *A Hebrew Word for the Day*

Pastor Watson's new book from AMG Publishers is now available. Read more about it, including sample pages, on our website (www.thescripturealone.com/HWFTD.html). If you like what you see, you can purchase it from Amazon (www.amazon.com) or Christian Book Distributors (www.christianbook.com). We

hope this book, like its predecessor (*A Word for the Day*; www.thescripturealone.com/WFTD.html), will be a blessing to many.

We greatly appreciate your support.