



GETTING STUDENTS TO READ

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OK...quit laughing. I know you folks too well. You're saying, "Most of these students don't even read their assigned classwork, much less anything else!" You're right. Most don't read much of anything except e-mail. But that doesn't mean we can't strategize ways to encourage them to discover the beauty and the benefits of reading great Christian books, particularly "the classics" of Christian writing - those that have stood the test of time, proven their value and always stay in print.

"Spiritual reading is. . . second only to prayer as a developer and support of the inner life."

You may be like me and cringe every time you walk into many neighborhood, or even chain-structured, Christian "bookstores." Often, books only take up 10% - 30% of the floor space. The rest is given over to Christian music, "Turn or Burn" T-shirts, bumper stickers that insult thinking believers and enrage non-believers and goofy Jesus-junk trinkets that end up in the "Truth is Stranger Than Fiction" column of THE DOOR (yes, It's still in print). Then you stroll into the book section, look around and tell yourself, "Wow. It's amazing what some publishers will print! After you locate a sales clerk you ask, "Do you have anything by Dietrich Bonhoeffer?" A puzzled look forms on the clerk's face, and, eventually you get the response. "I'll have to ask my manager. How do you spell that last name?"

So, how do we get students to read? Begin answering that question by examining your own pilgrimage toward an appreciation of reading. In my case, it was not because my parents were avid readers. My father read the newspaper, and my mother read magazines. There were just a few books in the house. How then, did I become a reader? My third grade teacher, an exciting summer reading program at the local public library and an unusually

well-stocked and well-run church library were the top factors in my developing a love of reading.

As I began taking my faith very seriously in high school and college, God brought different people into

*"Good books age well.
Good books glorify God."*

my life at various times who guided and influenced my reading. Pastors youth directors, two campus ministers and mature fellow lay believers were constantly telling me, "Charles, you really ought to read this book," and often gave me free copies to emphasize the point! I would also take note when a respected preacher, Bible teacher or retreat/conference speaker would mention important books. Building my own personal library (especially of Christian books) soon became a very healthy passion.

I have often drawn upon these memories and lessons of my reading mentors, and as a campus minister, tried to imitate their strategies with my students. Over the years I've met some occasional successes by recommending books to individual students, but the best way I have found to encourage reading on our campus is a unique small-group ministry we call the Christian Classics Society (CCS).

In the CCS we only read books that are at least twenty-five years old. We select books that have stood the test of time and are continually in print because of their recognized ability to nourish the soul, focus our thinking and ignite our vision. Also, by setting a publishing history minimum, that will prevent most students from suggesting some of those books you suspect are "hot today, gone tomorrow."

I will recruit a student (who I already know to be a reader) to lead a group and discuss with him/her a list of books in an area that I think an interest already exists. A specific book is chosen. A time and place for a group meeting is determined, and an intense promotional campaign is begun. Our BSU usually subsidizes the cost of the book to the student and will provide refreshments for the introductory meeting. Upon completing two meetings with

the group and exhibiting (to the group leader's satisfaction) a working knowledge of the assigned pages to be read, each participant is given a CCS T-shirt. Our current shirt is forest green with a medieval-looking drawing of a man reading a book. Next to the drawing are two Latin sentences which, when translated, read, "Good books age well. Good books glorify God."

How do we get students to read?

The vast majority of the groups are student-led, for obvious reasons--students attract students. Occasionally, I will enlist a non-student who has exceptional knowledge of a particular book and its author and has the communication skills to conduct a good discussion. Just as occasionally, I will lead a group myself.

The types of books the students have read have been quite varied. Authors include C.S. Lewis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, G.K. Chesterton, Elisabeth Elliott, Elton Trueblood, Martin Luther, J.I. Packer, John R.W. Stott, Charles Sheldon, and Clarence Jordan. I even got one group to read THE DIDACHE, a second century instructional, catechism-type writing of Christian beliefs and morality! For several of these authors there are biographical videos that we will show at the first meeting of the group.

In the April 24, 2000, issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY, you can find the results of a survey of the 100 books that had the most profound effect on Christians in the twentieth century. Some of these books are by non-Christians, but they still had a profound effect on the church (example--THE DIARY OF ANNE FRANK). Besides your own knowledge of classic Christian writing, you will find this list to be very helpful.

I have found this emphasis to be a small part of my overall ministry, but one from which I draw immense personal satisfaction. Give it a try. Your students will thank you now, and in the years to come. Allow me to close with a quote by Evelyn Underhill, author of MYSTICISM. "Spiritual reading is, or at least can be, second only to prayer as a developer and support of the inner life."

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