

# Kington Baptist Church

## MESSAGE BOARD – 78

Writing to his ‘son in the faith’ Timothy, Paul encourages him to ‘give attention to reading’. Most likely the *reading* Paul had in mind was the public reading of the Word of God. This would have been the Old Testament scriptures, from which Paul himself often quoted, and may also have included some of Paul’s own letters, that were later included in the New Testament. But Paul may have had more than that in mind.

Also writing to Timothy from prison in Rome, Paul asks for a few personal items. He asked for his cloak to be brought to him, to protect him from the cold. And he asked for something else, very precious to him: ‘*the books and the parchments*’. We don’t know exactly what these were. The *parchments* most probably were copies of his letters, including some that are now in the New Testament. The *books* he asked for would be just that, *books*, most likely *books* he found helpful to his spiritual life. I think this is most revealing. Paul was in prison, what he wants with him most of all are *books!* Clearly *books* mattered to the Apostle Paul. He didn’t imagine that as a Christian he was past reading *books*, despite his own great learning and the knowledge the Holy Spirit had given him of the things of God. *Books* still mattered to him and mattered to him at this late stage in his life. He didn’t imagine he’d outgrown reading *books*. Nor did Paul imagine that it was enough to confine his reading only to the Bible – nor should we! Like the Ethiopian court official we read about in the Acts of the Apostles, we too need ‘someone to explain the meaning’ to us.

Paul was a reader of *books*, and encouraged others to read *books*. And, like Paul, many Christians have found *books* have been the greatest help in their growth as Christians. This is a most vital matter. As Christians we are to grow ‘*in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ*’. *Books* are a wonderful blessing and have a most important part in our growth as Christians.

In *books* we find the deep spiritual wisdom and experience of the greatest saints throughout the ages. In *books* that are easily available to us today we have the words and wisdom of those who lived and wrote in the years immediately after the Apostles themselves. We have the thoughts and insight of those who lived in the brightest eras of the Church during the last two thousand years. Such *books* are an incalculable blessing. These *books* allow us to sit at the feet and learn from the wisest and most remarkable servants of God through the ages. Nothing will help us more to grow as Christians than following Paul’s example and ‘*give attention to reading*’.

There have always been some strange Christians who hold that all they need to understand the Bible will be given to them personally by the Holy Spirit. Whereas the Bible itself makes quite clear that the Holy Spirit works in and

through the Church. He calls, equips and appoints pastors and teachers, whose privilege and calling is to teach God's people *'the truth once for all delivered to the saints'*. So while the Holy Spirit teaches us directly, he also uses those he appoints to teach and preach – he does this now as he always has, since the beginning of the New Testament Church.

In God's providence the teaching of these men and women who have been so great an influential for good in the Church has been committed to writing – and is within our reach. This is itself a remarkable providence, one we take too much for granted. It is a high privilege to be able to 'sit at the feet' of those whom God so powerfully used and gifted with wisdom and insight into the Word of Truth. I sometimes wonder, just how far I'd be willing to travel if I had the opportunity to hear the preaching of the most eloquent, searching, knowledgeable and effective preachers of the last 2,000 years! But by God's grace these people *'being dead still speak'* – through their *books*.

In 1588 Richard Sibbes, a Cambridge undergraduate, travelled to hear a famous preacher of the time, Paul Bayne, at St Andrews church. He was soundly converted and gave himself to the preaching of the gospel by mouth and by pen. He wrote a book with the title, *The Bruised Reed*. Some years later Richard Baxter, born in Shropshire and a preacher, first in Bridgnorth and then in Kidderminster – a town totally transformed by his preaching, was influenced by Sibbes' book. Through it he saw more clearly the love and grace of God. Out of the fullness of his heart, Richard Baxter wrote *The Saints Everlasting Rest* and many other books. In 1702 the wife of a non-conformist tradesman gave birth to her twentieth child. The child was so weak he was given up for dead. But he survived to sit on his mother's knee and be taught the Scriptures, *'which are able to make us wise unto salvation'*. Philip Doddridge, for he was that child, grew up to read and be deeply influenced by Richard Baxter's books. He himself also wrote many books, one called *The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul*. In 1767 an 8-year old boy was lifted onto a table to show-off to other scholars the excellence of his fine diction. A few years later, while travelling through France, he had by his side a copy of Doddridge's *The Rise and Progress of Religion*. The Spirit of God touched William Willberforce's heart, for he was this child, and set him on a course of great usefulness in the Kingdom of God. Willberforce, through reading, Doddridge's book became a fully committed evangelical in outlook and was compelled to write *The Practical View of Christianity*. The Scot, Thomas Chalmers, was deeply affected by three momentous events: a sudden and serious illness brought-on by family trials, the change he experienced while writing an article on *'Christianity'*, and the dynamic effect on his soul of reading Willberforce's book. Thomas Chalmers is remembered as one of the most influential Scottish Christians of the nineteenth century, his impact on Scottish church-life and social conditions is remembered to this day.

I cannot recommend too strongly the carefully reading of a few good books. Our lives are busy, maybe too busy; but our time is limited and so it's vital that we do not waste the time we have for reading – maybe a start will be less of the daily newspaper – and more of a good book! If you're not sure what to read, start with the Bible, and don't feel that the best way to read the Bible is to get through as much as possible. Quality of reading is infinitely more important than quantity. Read a little and ponder a lot! That's the way to feed your soul. Ponder on what you read – more a boiled sweet than a jelly baby!