



Archibald Alexander on The Use and Abuse of Books

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In 1812 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America elected Archibald Alexander as the first professor in its newly established theological seminary. Alexander was forty years old. He had already served as a preacher, college president, and pastor. His preparation for leading the first Presbyterian seminary had been enriched by his experience of American life in the South, the Middle States, and New England; on the frontier, in the country, and in a major city. Alexander was the primary force that gave direction to Princeton Theological Seminary for at least its first hundred years.

Soon after his installation as professor of didactic and polemic theology, the seminary's board of directors also appointed Alexander librarian, a position he held until his death in 1851. He began the work, carried on by others, that eventually made the seminary library one of the finest theological libraries in the world.

For a few years the library of Princeton College also served as the seminary library. But students and professors (Alexander was joined by Samuel Miller and later by Charles Hodge) began collecting books for a separate seminary library. At first these were placed in the home of Dr. and Mrs. Alexander, which also served as the seminary chapel and classroom.

When the first seminary building (later named Alexander Hall) was completed in 1817, it provided rooms for a hundred students, a dining hall, the oratory or prayer hall for chapel and lectures, and the library. In 1825 this was named the Green Library in honor of Ashbel Green, a Philadelphia pastor who became president of Princeton College. In 1843 the first

seminary library building was completed, given by and named for New York philanthropist James Lenox.

Beginning early in the seminary's history, an introductory lecture was presented at the beginning of each school year. There are seventeen introductory lectures by Archibald Alexander in his manuscripts. His introductory lecture for 1813 ranged widely over practical and devotional issues related to call to the ministry. In another lecture, Alexander addressed the topic of "defects of character among ministers of the Gospel who are in the main upright." One lecture dealt with the "means of using to the best advantage the opportunities afforded by a theological seminary." Alexander's lecture for 1819 was on the "importance of vital piety and holy living in all who aspire to the ministry of the Word." In the lecture for 1823 Alexander dealt with the question, "Can anything be done to raise the standard of piety in this seminary?"

In his introductory lectures Alexander often touched on matters related to reading and studying books. In the late 1820s he gave the opening address to the seminary on the topic "The Use and Abuse of Books."

Alexander's practical wisdom, his love for learning and books (according to his son, he treated books with "religious tenderness"), and his balanced advice and practical guidance to his students on how they best could use books for information and edification comprised this address, in which he proposed to offer "some little assistance" to his students in their



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“literary pursuits.” A few of Alexander’s comments were corrected by later study, and some ideas seem a little dated, but on the whole his advice given to ministerial students more than 180 years ago is true and helpful today.

Alexander began his introductory lecture on “The Use and Abuse of Books” by describing books as “the scholar’s armor with which he fights” and “the implements with which he performs his work.” He then gave a short history of writing and printing (“the most important after the discovery of the alphabet,” he said). Because of printing, he pointed out, books are now so plentiful and affordable that “a sufficient number are within the reach of every scholar.” In fact, the multiplicity of books may greatly perplex and sometimes discourage the “studious scholar.” He may well feel overwhelmed by “the sight of this vast mass of literature which he beholds in public libraries and in bookstores.” He could be at a loss as to where to begin, or what to select, and may sometimes think “it is vain to begin at all, as he is sure he can never get through so many volumes.”

Alexander emphasized that “the Bible, the first and best of books and heaven’s richest gift to man, contains treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Alexander believed that there were no more ancient writings than those of Moses. It was reasonable to conclude, he said, that “the making of books originated in divine appointment and was performed by divine assistance.”

Alexander, however, told his students preparing for the ministry that it was important for them to read books other than the Bible. The Bible, he said, “was not given to teach us everything, but only to point out our duty and show us the method of salvation; but other knowledge is useful and even necessary to the enjoyment of those comforts which a beneficent God allows his creatures in this world, and also to the propagation of the gospel through the world.” Books supply us with much useful knowledge, he said, to support and complement what the Bible contains. He noted that “the book of God consists chiefly of facts,” and, therefore, history is important. It holds, he said, “a high place among the objects of human knowledge.” Books furnish us with knowledge of languages, “without which ancient books, divine or human, cannot be read.” Books on science have been perfected “by the labors of successive generations” and provide us with valuable information that helps us in applying the general principles of the Bible “to the various relations and circumstances of human life.”

Our study, however, should support and not lead us away from the study of the Bible, “which contains the

substance of all our theology and foundation of all our hopes.” No one “can use too much diligence in digging in this field,” Alexander said. Other books are helpful “just in proportion as they aid us in understanding the Bible.”

It is important that the student be furnished with a guide in his literary pursuits, and “to afford some little assistance on this subject” was the design of Dr. Alexander’s lecture.

The manuscript of Alexander’s address contains thirty-four points! It begins with twelve “principal ends” that can be answered by books, followed by twenty-two “maxims which should govern us in the use of books.” Fortunately for his hearers, most of Dr. Alexander’s points are quite brief, sometimes consisting of only one sentence, such as “Some books should be read not only with care, but perused over and over again.”

In setting forth the “principal ends” for reading books, Alexander offered sage advice still relevant to our reading today.

Books are helpful in giving us “models of good writing.” They enrich our minds by providing “a variety of figures and illustrations.” They help us to develop “a preciseness of language.” Furthermore, Alexander told the students, “books furnish an innocent pleasure which can be enjoyed in solitude.” They not only provide information but serve “to amuse and relax the mind.” “Much useful knowledge may be acquired in the hours of relaxation,” the Princeton professor said, and he advised his hearers to “follow your own authors.”

In a time when many Christians, and especially ministers, disapproved of the reading of novels, Alexander in his youth had written a religious novel. It was circulated among his friends but never published. His son, J.W. Alexander, described the book as the story of “a young lady of wealth and beauty, who is led through various changes and degrees, from giddy ignorance to piety and peace. The plot was engaging; there was a thread of romantic but pure love running through the whole; it abounded in graphic description and lively dialogue.”

Dr. Alexander’s second main point laid down “some maxims which should govern us in the use of books.”

Alexander warned the students not to substitute reading for thinking. You must not read too much without taking time to think about what you have read. To fail to do so, he said, was “like eating a great deal which the stomach cannot digest.” “To burden the memory with a multitude of undigested and unanalyzed things is of no use,” he said. “It would be better to leave them in books.”

Read the best books available on a subject, the professor advised. Endeavor to find out what the best are by conversations with the “learned” and by reading “judicious reviews.” Look at the table of contents and the index of a book, and, if possible, read a few chapters in the book. Alexander himself made a practice of commenting on books to help others choose what to read. He was a good reviewer, not merely praising a book but fairly and honestly assessing it. One example of Alexander’s approach can be seen in his preface to John Matthews’s *The Divine Purpose, Displayed in the Works of Providence and Grace* (first published in 1825 and reprinted by Solid Ground Christian Books in 2009). Alexander wrote:

The chief excellency of these Letters [the book is a series of nineteen letters] is, that they present the subject of DIVINE DECREES, without the forbidding aspect, which it is apt to assume in the view of many persons. One thing the reader may be assured of, that whether he should coincide in opinion with the author or not, he will find nothing in the volume calculated to wound the most delicate feelings. A spirit of meekness and kindness, eminently characteristic of the writer, pervades the whole.

This brief review tells me something important about Matthews’s book and makes me want to read it because I am interested in the subject and because I value the comments of Dr. Alexander. He was a convinced Calvinist but also a generous Christian, with friendship and sympathy for Christians of other persuasions.

Don’t copy long quotations from a book, Alexander said, although it is useful to make notes of main points, facts, and dates. It is often helpful to make a summary of what we have read. Alexander approved of marking in the margin with a pencil passages that one wishes to remember “so that we can go over the book a second time with a glance.” This should be done, however, only with the books we own!

Many books of great value are needed “only for occasional reference,” but don’t settle for encyclopedias and dictionaries for knowledge of a subject on which you want to be truly learned. “Compendis are useful to those who have learned a science, but the more a thing is learned in detail at first, the better.”

“In selecting books, we should not blindly attach ourselves to the ancients or moderns, to writers of this or that nation or sect, to the exclusion of all others.” Crossed out in Alexander’s manuscript and presumably eliminated from his address are the following ideas: models of exquisite composition in prose and verse are found in the Greek and Latin classics; in the physical

sciences we should turn to modern writers; in theology “the moderns have advanced beyond their predecessors in some branches especially...in biblical criticism; but in didactic and polemical theology the writers...” Here the note ends, but obviously Alexander would say that in these areas the older theologians are the best. He chose the *Latin Institutio Theologiae Elenticae* of Francis Turretin, the seventeenth-century theologian of Geneva, for the basic text in his theology classes!

Alexander warned against scattering “our labors over too wide a field.” By “aiming at too much, we become superficial in everything,” he said. Although he added that “general knowledge is very necessary to an accomplished minister of the gospel.” Alexander was himself a good example of this, as is the Princeton journal—*The Biblical Repertory*—begun in 1825 by Charles Hodge, a graduate of the seminary and its third professor, having joined Archibald Alexander and Samuel Miller in 1822. The journal dealt with a broad range of biblical and theological topics but also included contributions, some by Dr. Alexander, on matters of science, philosophy, geography, literature, and history.

Because so many books were now being published and readily available, Alexander warned the students to be on guard against unnecessarily increasing the number of books by an immature attempt themselves to write books. Better wait until they were well qualified than publish too soon, Alexander warned, so that “the old man” will not wish that he could recall “what the young man has said.” Alexander’s manuscript includes the names Augustine and Baxter here, as examples of prolific authors who found it necessary to retract some of their early ideas. Alexander added a few exceptions to his advice: when a man’s “people or his acquaintances are furnished with few books and would be more disposed to read his”; when truth is being opposed by means of popular books or pamphlets; when a person “can write sermons or tracts adapted to the capacities of common people” that contain “the savor of true piety” (“such books are greatly needed”); and when a person has made himself master of some field of knowledge on which there is little of value in print. In 1843 Alexander wrote to Walter Lowrie, Princeton graduate and missionary in China, urging him to write a book about China, “because we greatly want information respecting that wonderful country.”

Alexander’s first book, *A Brief Outline of the Evidences of the Christian Religion*, was published in 1825 when he was fifty-three. Thereafter he wrote substantial books on theology, Bible history, Christian life, church history, and a history of African colonization, in addition

to several volumes of sermons and many articles for the *Biblical Repertory*.

Buy books carefully, preferring those you have not read, those that are valuable but scarce, the best editions of valuable works, and books needed for reference. Sometimes it is better to borrow a book, “not for the sake of economy...but because you will use more diligence in reading it than if it were your own.” Alexander deplored the practice of neglecting to return borrowed books. “It should be one of our fixed rules when we borrow a book to read it speedily, use it carefully, and return it certainly.”

Alexander urged the students to “converse together on the subjects of your reading.” This produces many benefits, he said; “it is like holding up several lights around an obscure object: the part which is not illuminated by the rays of one may catch those of another.” Such discussions, however, must be conducted “with candor and good humor. If ambition to conquer takes

the place of the love of truth instead of friendly discussion, there will be disgraceful contention.”

Alexander concluded his lecture:

But finally, in all your reading and studies, bear it in mind that all true wisdom cometh down from above. Ask of God, therefore, to bestow upon you the knowledge of the truth.... When you take a book in your hand, lift up your heart to God for a blessing; and often as you read let your desires ascend to the source of light, that your minds may be irradiated with beams from the sun of righteousness.

Amen and amen!

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