

THE EROSION OF CHRISTIAN LITERACY

'That you may know...'



Abraham Lincoln and "Tad"

THE PRAYERS OF PAUL:

... that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him ... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. Ephesians 1:17-19

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ. Philippians 1:9,10

... we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God ... Colossians 1:9,10

LITERACY & FALSE TEACHING: *"If truth be not diffused, error will be ..."*

If religious books are not widely circulated among the masses in this country, I do not know what is going to become of us as a nation. If truth be not diffused, error will be; if God and His Word are not known and received, the devil and his works will gain the ascendancy; if the evangelical volume does not reach every hamlet, the pages of a corrupt and licentious literature will; if the power of the Gospel is not felt throughout the length and breadth of the land, anarchy and misrule, degradation and misery, corruption and darkness, will reign without mitigation or end. **Daniel Webster** [1823]

Of course, you are not such wiseacres as to think or say that you can expound Scripture without assistance from the works of divines and learned men who have laboured before you ... it seems odd that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to them, should think so little of what he has revealed to others ... The temptation of our times lies rather in empty pretensions to novelty of sentiment, than in a slavish following of accepted guides. A respectful acquaintance with the opinions of the giants of the past might have saved many an erratic thinker from wild interpretations and outrageous influences. **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** *Commenting and Commentaries* p.1

... we must use all helps, which the Lord offereth unto us, for the understanding of the Scriptures. Frantic men require inspirations and revelations from heaven, and in the mean season, they condemn the minister of God, by whose hand they ought to be governed. Other some, which trust too much to their own wit, will vouchsafe to hear no man, and they will read no commentaries. But God will not have us to despise those helps which he offereth unto us, and he suffereth not those to escape scot free which despise the same. And here we must remember that the Scripture is not only given us, but that interpreters and teachers are also added, to be helps to us. **John Calvin** *Acts* p.355 [tr. Fetherstone, 1585]

LITERACY and the EROSION of FREEDOM:

‘Cut every generation off from all others ...’

...since we cannot deceive the whole human race all the time, it is most important thus to cut every generation off from all others; for where learning makes a free commerce between the ages there is always the danger that the characteristic errors of one may be corrected by the characteristic truths of another. But thanks be to our Father and the Historical Point of View, great scholars are now as little nourished by the past as the most ignorant mechanic ... -- C.S.Lewis The Screwtape Letters

HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

If America had not read her *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, would Lincoln have emancipated the slaves? Would Lincoln even have become President?

Wherever the Awakening spread, there was generated a craving for popular instruction, and that craving Wesley, the one-time don, was determined to satisfy... Bible religion demanded knowledge both of Scriptures and co-related books. Wesley himself taught that one could never be a “thorough Christian” without extensive reading. -- **J. Wesley Bready** *This Freedom* -- *Whence?* p.182

Francis Asbury, Wesley's master-builder in America, was a characteristic product of the Revival ... Like Wesley, he rose habitually at 4 a.m. ... he strove to account for every moment of every day. Self-taught, without fixed abode ... he made it his rule to read 100 pages of good literature daily. He taught himself Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

Always his saddle-bags were packed with books which he himself had mastered; and many of these he persuaded not only his preachers and Class-leaders but 1000s of his humblest followers, to buy and read ... Log schools and Churches ... reared by ... settlers who hungered for understanding and righteousness, rose up as beacon-lights wherever this holy man went. -- *ibid* p.315

Richard Baxter wrote *A Call to the Unconverted*, and Philip Doddridge was converted by reading it; ... Doddridge wrote ... *Progress of Religion in the Soul*, ... Wilberforce was converted by reading it; Wilberforce wrote the *Practical View*, and Thomas Chalmers was converted by reading it. What a far-extending influence does each of these names represent! **J. Stalker**, *The Preacher and His Models* p.124

WILLIAM WILBERFORCE

If Wilberforce had not read Doddridge, would abolition of slavery in the British Empire, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, OR Lincoln have been possible?

“... the clean sea breeze of the centuries ...”

Upon the subject of education ... I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people can be engaged in. That every man may receive at least a moderate education, and thereby be enabled to read the histories of his own and other countries, by which he may duly appreciate the value of our free institutions, appears to be an object of vital importance, even on this account alone, to say nothing of the advantages and satisfaction to be derived from all being able to read the Scriptures, and other works both of religious and moral nature, for themselves. **A. Lincoln** (in **G. F. Owen**, *Abraham Lincoln, The Man and His Faith* p.21)

How criminal, then, must this voluntary ignorance of Christianity and the Word of God appear in the sight of God. When God of His goodness has granted us such abundant means of instruction, how great must be the guilt, and how awful must be the punishment, of voluntary ignorance! And why are we to expect knowledge without inquiry, and success without endeavor? ... No one expects to attain to the heights of learning, or arts, or power, or wealth, or military glory without vigorous resolution, strenuous diligence, and steady perseverance. Yet we expect to be Christians without labor, study, or inquiry! -- **William Wilberforce** *Real Christianity* p.4

This mistaken preference for the modern books and this shy of the old ones is nowhere more rampant than in theology. Wherever you find a little study circle of Christian laity you can be almost certain that they are studying not St. Luke or St Paul or St Augustine or Thomas Aquinas or Hooker or Butler, but M. Berdyaev or M. Maritain or Mr. Niebuhr or Miss Sayers or even myself. Now this seems to me topsy-turvy ... A new book is still on trial and the amateur is not in a position to judge it. It has to be tested against the great body of Christian thought down the ages,... keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the *same* mistakes ... Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction. -- **C.S. Lewis** *First and Second Things* pp.26-28

