



## Soul Food for the Coming Year by Ryan Reese

We envision a congregation whose love for Jesus and one another leaves a clear and compelling witness for Christ.

John Wesley was so convinced of the spiritual benefits of fasting that he practiced the discipline every Wednesday and Friday. In fact, he refused to ordain anyone into the Methodist ministry who did not do the same. Wesley even wished he could force the believers in his congregation to do the same—but lacked such a strict biblical mandate. As a fellow pastor, I understand his desire to press extra-biblical rules on fellow Christians for their good. But a weekly fast might not be my first issue to press upon the Pinehurst faithful (though fasting is good *and* biblical). Instead of a fast, I would mandate a church-wide feast of the mind. I would invite you to read good books that help you better understand and enjoy God.

Now please understand, I'm not talking about reading simply for reading's sake. Though reading books is better for the mind than say, watching television, there are many who read and read to the *detriment* of their souls (even some "Christian" books—just because a book is published by a Christian publisher doesn't mean it has correct theology or is beneficial to read). I'm suggesting rather that you commit to give your mind to the reading of spiritually edifying books this year—words that put you in a better position to be transformed "by the renewal of your mind," as Paul wrote to the Romans (Romans 12:1-2).

Let's face it: we are *conformed*. Before we met Jesus we thought in generally the same sinful ways everyone else does. And even now, much of what we put *into* our minds—from news papers, to television, to the words belted out in song on the radio—are simply reaffirming and guiding that old sinful way of thinking. Therefore, Christians old and new are in serious need of reprogramming. Our minds are bent in a certain direction

(toward sin) and are now in the process of being bent in another direction (toward God). We are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6), but we have become quite used to the thoughts and practices of such slavery.

What we are thinking about—even as we entertain ourselves—is having an effect on us. The ideas of the surrounding culture will never stop coming at us, and ideas have consequences. We are not supposed to be of the world, but we are in it, so the world's ideas will surround us. However, we can make sure that the mental food we can control—what we choose to watch, listen to, or read—is spiritually helpful rather than hurtful. We don't need help conforming to the world. We get that from simply being a part of it. But we do need help to think *Christianly* instead. And the best way to do this that I know is not by listening to music, talk radio, or staring at the television. The best way I've found to feed my mind good things is by reading good books—food for the soul.

What follows is a list of ten of the better books I read this year that I think would help you understand and enjoy God more. If all of these are not in the library they will be there soon. They are listed in no particular order...well, except the first one.

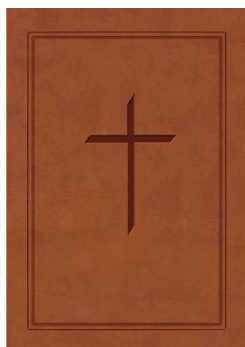
1. The Bible. Hopefully you don't need to hear this, but Christians ought to read their Bibles every day. Reading, studying, thinking about, and praying over the Scriptures is the number one way God communicates with us and transforms our minds. And we must not merely *dabble* in the Scriptures, haphazardly flipping through randomly each day. We need to read *all* of God's Word—not just the parts we like or are more familiar with. And to do

this well, most of us need the discipline of a reading plan. There are many plans available to get you through the Bible once or twice in a year. I have used the M'Cheyne plan in recent years, which guides you through the New Testament and Psalms twice and the Old Testament once in the course of a year. There are many websites which offer different plans, such as Bible Gateway and ESV Online. (There are copies of two plans available in the foyer and the library.) The plan you choose is not nearly as important as the practice of reading portions of the Bible every day and exposing yourself to the whole counsel of God. God's Word is our food (Deut. 8:3/Matt. 4:4).

2. *For the Love of God, Volume 2* by D.A. Carson (Crossway, 2006). I'm not a fan of daily devotionals. Many people use them *instead of* reading the Bible. And most devotionals give you one or two verses to read each day followed by the thoughts of the author, giving much greater weight and time to the thoughts of the author. But *For the Love of God* is one of the few devotionals I've found that puts the emphasis on the Scriptures, with a minimal (though meaty) explanation of the text by the author. This book (and the first volume as well) follows the Robert Murray M'Cheyne reading plan already mentioned. Each day you read two chapters from the Old Testament and two from the New. Then Carson spends a page or so discussing the meaning of one of the passages. If you read one book this year, read the Bible. If you read two books this year, read the Bible with this book as your guide. (You can read this book, for free, every day at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/loveofgod/>.)

But he answered, "It is written, 'man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Matthew 4:4



## Soul Food for the Coming Year (*continued*)

3. Os Guinness—*The Case for Civility* (Harper Collins, 2008). In the hateful chaos that was the last election cycle, I needed to hear from a level Christian mind to sharpen my approach to politics. Os Guinness was that voice. He is a foreigner (British) who has lived in the United States for over twenty years. He is thus equipped to avoid both pitfalls many American Christians fall into—taking the great things about our country for granted, and being too blinded by patriotism to offer proper criticism of her. If you have questions about religious freedom and how Christians should engage in politics, this book is a great place to start. The only book I've read about God and government that was better was...

4. Charles Colson—*Kingdoms in Conflict* (Wm. Morrow/Zondervan, 1987). Colson occupied the office next to President Nixon, until the Watergate scandal earned him an office in prison. While behind bars, Mr. Colson met Jesus and began examining his experience in politics and foreign affairs in light of the Scriptures. This book contains those reflections. Colson's work is delightful, full of biographical sketches of believers living under both the authority of human governments and the kingdom of heaven. A few trips through this book would be more helpful than a few thousand hours listening to political punditry on talk radio.

5. Walter Wangerin—*The Book of the Dun Cow* (Harper and Row, 1978). This was the best work of fiction that I read this year. Yes, fiction. Don't let the fact that the heroes of this story are chickens, dogs and weasels. This book made me *groan* at the evil powers at work in this world and weep at the sacrifice of Christ to take down the enemy. Sometimes the best way to see what is going on in the real world is to see the truth played out in another.

6. Vaughan Roberts—*God's Big Picture* (IVP, 2002). This short book is the best introduction to the storyline of the Bible I've ever read. If the Bible seems too big and you often get lost in the details, this is the book for you. Roberts helps us understand where the story is going and why each part of it—be it Leviticus, Proverbs or 1 John—matters.

7. Doug Wilson—*Reforming Marriage* (Canon Press, 1995). Most marriage books, even Christian marriage books, don't get to the heart of problems. They use psychology to address symptoms rather than theology to address sin. Why can marriage be difficult? Because husbands and wives are sinners. The key to having a healthier marriage is to become healthier Christians, who take their cues as husbands and wives from the Scriptures, not from the culture. Read this book with your spouse and see what happens.

8. Greg Gilbert—*What is the Gospel?* (Crossway, 2010). This book is short and snappy, clearly explaining the most important ideas any human being must deal with. If you get the gospel wrong, you are in trouble. If the church gets the gospel wrong, the world is in trouble.

9. N.D. Wilson—*Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl* (Thomas Nelson, 2009). This was hands down the most *enjoyable* book I read this year. Classifying it is difficult. It is a defense of the faith and a call to pay attention to God's creation and worship, as even the small things are cause for wonder. Wilson is one of the most engaging authors I've ever read. Most works of apologetics or theology don't make me laugh out loud. This one did. He writes books for young people as well. The Reese family will be reading them all, and you can too, because they are in the church library.

10. John Piper—*Desiring God* (Multnomah, 1986, 1996, 2011).

Sometimes my wimpy heart needs a good kicking. My love for God grows cold. My joy dries up. Piper is always guaranteed to deliver such a kicking. I first read this book in college and he opened my eyes to the glory of the God portrayed in Scripture. And I've come back to it again and again. If your Christianity is more dutiful than enjoyable, then read this book. Piper reminds us that God is glorified most when we are happiest in Him. Seeking pleasure isn't the problem. Seeking pleasures less than God doesn't bring us ultimate joy. ✍

## In Praise of Short Books

by Brian Watson

I have read many books this year, but I've found that some of the best ones address one topic and are short. Short books (not *small* books) are great because even busy people can read them. I want to second Ryan's recommendations of *What Is the Gospel?* and *God's Big Picture*. Most Christians have a hard time articulating the gospel message, and this is a big problem. The first book will help you remember the basic framework: God-man-Jesus-response. The second book helps us understand the story of the Bible, which is our story, too. Let me offer a third short book suggestion: *Delighting in the Trinity* by Michael Reeves (IVP Academic, 2012). In 130 pages, Reeves teaches about the Trinity in a delightful way. We *must* know who God is, and if we don't understand the Trinity, we really don't know the God of the Bible. If I could give everyone in the church just three books outside of the Bible—books you have time to read and can understand—it would be these three books. ✍