

A Few Words from the Director

May 2010

As summer approaches I am reminded of a memorable sermon I heard some years ago at this time of the year. It was about the role of discipline in Christian discipleship, and the preacher did a good job of making the case for intellectual discipline (among other things). I don't remember everything he said, but I remember well a practical suggestion he made toward the end of the sermon.

For many of us, he observed, summer is a time for reading. In particular we have opportunities to read books that we would otherwise not tackle in our busy lives. Especially is this true when we go on vacation. Some of us, he said, even make a point of collecting books during the rest of the year in the hope of being able to read them when we are on vacation.

He conceded that the books we gather for that purpose vary widely. Some appeal to us purely for their entertainment value. But by no means do all of them have that character. Some are intellectually challenging, and we set them aside for summer reading precisely because we suspect they will make demands on us. We know we will have to pay attention even to follow what the author has to say.

With those prefatory comments, he then said, "Wouldn't it be great if every summer each of us could read at least one book that was chosen to help us improve our understanding of our faith?" He then went on to list some possibilities: an intelligent commentary on a particular book of the Bible, an accessible work by a theologian, a biography of some significant figure in the history of our tradition, or even a novel by someone like Frederick Buechner or Marilynne Robinson.

I don't know how that sermon was received, much less how many of those who heard it took the preacher's advice. But I hope that many took his message to heart. In reflecting on that sermon, I have also wished that more people were hearing that kind of message from the pulpit. For it is just the kind of thing we Presbyterians need to be hearing these days. We are by now far removed from the days when Reformed Christians were known for their Biblical and theological literacy. But there are steps we could take to counteract the pressures pulling us in the other direction, and serious reading is surely one of the more obvious ones.

But what exactly should we be reading? Ever since the Reformed Institute was established, we have tried to provide informed answers to that question, and we will continue to do so. In June we will be posting once again another of my "Not Exactly Beach Reading" lists, and then all summer we will be posting on this web site substantial articles on some of the new books we think are worthy of your consideration. The first, a review of Diarmaid McCullough's new study of *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* by Eric Springsted, a member of our Company of Teachers and the interim pastor of the Georgetown Presbyterian Church, will be appearing by the end of May. Another, by Jon Smoot, who is also a member of the Company and the interim pastor of the Falls Church Presbyterian Church, will be coming by the end of June. I hope you will find these reviews interesting, and even more, that they will entice you to do some serious reading this summer.

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