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From the Selected Works of Michael J. Paulus, Jr.

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2005

# [Edited with an Introduction] The Use and Abuse of Books

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# The Use and Abuse of Books

by ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER

*Introduction and transcription by Michael J. Paulus, Jr., Technical Services Librarian, Special Collections, Luce Library, Princeton Theological Seminary*

## INTRODUCTION

IN 1812 THE General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America elected Archibald Alexander (1772–1851) to be the first professor at its first theological seminary. Prior to his appointment as professor of didactic and polemic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Alexander had been an itinerant preacher and college president in Virginia and then pastor of Third Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. Soon after his installation, the Seminary's board of directors appointed Alexander librarian of the Seminary, a position that, along with a professorship, he held until his death. Meeting with the Seminary's first few students in his rented home, which was "at once library, chapel, and auditorium," Alexander quickly began developing the curriculum and library of the nascent school to support its founding ambition: "to raise up a succession of men at once *qualified for* and thoroughly *devoted to* the work of the Gospel ministry."<sup>1</sup>

The address transcribed below was delivered to one of the Seminary's entering classes in the late 1820s.<sup>2</sup> In it, Alexander offers new students ("scholars") guidance on how they best may use books for "information and edification." From his opening metaphors, which speak of books as combative armor and constructive tools, through his final exhortation to pray while in the midst of studies, Alexander challenges his students to consider why they read, what they read, how they read, and whether they should become authors themselves. Along the way, Alexander speculates about the origin of books, discusses the common grace found in them, and works through the implications of a growing print market for reading and writing practices. Although some of Alexander's thoughts may strike us as antiquated, such as the linguistic priority of the Hebrew language, many others, such as the prudence with which one should pursue publishing, remain relevant and sound.

<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander, D.D., First Professor in the Theological Seminary at Princeton, New Jersey* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1854), 373; *Report of a Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, Exhibiting the Plan of a Theological Seminary: To Be Submitted to the Next Assembly* (New York: J. Seymour, 1810), 4.

<sup>2</sup> The manuscript is located in the Archibald Alexander Collection, Special Collections, Princeton Theological Seminary Libraries, box 8, folder 7. For dating of the lecture, see Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander*, 468.

This previously unpublished address offers an interesting glimpse of antebellum theological education at Princeton and of the larger American print culture of which that education was part. More particularly, it highlights one pastor-professor-librarian's high view of books. According to his son and biographer, Alexander "treated books with a religious tenderness."<sup>3</sup> Behind this adoration was a belief that books were indispensable for education and growth, particularly for ministers of the Gospel. —Michael J. Paulus, Jr.

THE USE AND ABUSE OF BOOKS BY ARCHIBALD ALEXANDER<sup>4</sup>

As books are the scholar's armor with which he fights, and as they furnish the implements with which he performs his work, I have selected for the subject of this introductory lecture, "The Use and Abuse of Books."

Books are the scholar's armor. They are the implements with which he performs his work. In the early ages of the world, when the life of man was protracted through many centuries and human knowledge was confined within narrow limits, books were not necessary. The memory of the aged served as a sufficient repository of facts and oral traditions as an adequate means of their communication.

But at an early period in the history of the world it appeared good to infinite wisdom to direct that the revelations which were made to man should be committed to writing. As there is no evidence of any more ancient writings than those of Moses, it is reasonable to conclude that the making of books originated in divine appointment and was performed by divine assistance. There can therefore exist no doubt as to the importance and utility of this means of instruction. The Bible, the first and best of books and heaven's richest gift to man, contains treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

But a doubt might possibly arise whether any other books were useful or necessary, especially as it is maintained that the written revelation of God's will is perspicuous and complete. But such a doubt would readily be dissipated by considering that the evidence of the Bible's authenticity depends on the knowledge of facts which must be learned from other books—that reference is often made in scriptural history to transactions as if they were known but with which we can be acquainted only by other books. The same may be said of ancient customs and opinions. The prophecies contained in the Bible foretell the destinies of many nations and cities, and of the church

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>4</sup> Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation have been changed to conform to modern conventions. Abbreviations, contractions, and ampersands have been expanded. With the exception of the deleted portion that appears in footnote seven below, Alexander's own corrections to his text have been incorporated into this transcription. The editor's corrections appear in brackets. All footnotes in Alexander's text are the editor's.

even to the end of the world; in most cases the fulfillment of these predictions must be watched for in other writings than the sacred scriptures.

Besides, the Bible 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. The knowledge of agriculture, of architecture, of the arts by which clothing is prepared, of geometry, geography, navigation, et cetera, is highly useful. But this knowledge is not contained in the Bible; for it, therefore, we must have recourse to other books.

The reasoning of Omar the successor of Mohammed respecting the celebrated library at Alexandria was not sound, who, being consulted respecting the disposal of the books, directed them to be burned, saying, If they contain anything different from the Koran they are false and pernicious—if the same, they are useless.<sup>5</sup>

The state of literature, in regard to books, is greatly changed from what it formerly was. When it was necessary to make books by the slow process of writing every letter with the hand, and when the materials with which they were made were with difficulty acquired, books must have been rare and costly. None but the man of wealth could acquire any considerable number. But since the invention of printing, which must be considered the most important after the discovery of the alphabet, books have been multiplied to such a degree that a sufficient number are within the reach of every scholar. Indeed, as benefits seldom fail to be accompanied with some inconvenience, this multiplicity of books is calculated greatly to perplex and sometimes to discourage and mislead the studious scholar. He finds himself overwhelmed by a sight of this vast mass of literature which he beholds in public libraries and in bookstores. He is at a loss where to begin, or what to select, and sometimes thinks it is vain to begin at all, as he is sure he can never get through so many volumes.

It is a matter of importance, therefore, that the young student should be furnished with a guide in his literary pursuits. He should also obtain the knowledge of such general rules as may be useful to direct his course when he may not enjoy the privilege of living instructors. To afford some little assistance on this subject is the design of this introductory lecture.

<sup>5</sup> Rather than suffering a single catastrophe at the hands of Romans, Christians, or Arabs, the great libraries at Alexandria suffered a series of misfortunes over the centuries until they were thoroughly destroyed or disbursed. See Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 22–32.

I will begin, then, by distinctly stating some of the principal ends which can be answered by books; for unless we keep these in view, we shall often wander at random and spend our time and labor without profit.

1. Books serve in the first place as a repository of facts which occurred before we existed or beyond the sphere of our observation. It is worthy of observation that the book of God consists chiefly of facts. These are made the foundation of that system of instruction with which we are presented in the Bible. From this we may take a hint that the knowledge of facts is the most important branch of human knowledge. History, therefore, holds a high place among the objects of human knowledge.
2. Books are necessary to furnish us with the knowledge of languages without which ancient books, divine or human, cannot be read. We should go to the sources.
3. They furnish us with new, perspicuous, and enlarged views of truth by admitting us to an acquaintance with the opinions and reasonings of men of the most profound and extensive research. By [these] we are often enabled speedily to arrive at conclusions which otherwise we could not have reached at all, or only after a tedious and perplexing pursuit. In knowledge one man has the advantage of standing, as it were, upon the shoulders of his predecessors; and though not possessing greater nor equal capacity, yet he may go much further. By this means sciences have been perfected by the labors of successive generations which otherwise must have remained in their infancy. And this applies in some degree also to subjects of revelation. For the sacred scriptures give us general principles from which we are bound to derive legitimate inferences and which we must apply, according to our thrift, to the various relations and circumstances of human life.
4. Books also answer the purpose of resolving our doubts, which are often attended with painful perplexity.
5. Books also serve to confirm us in the truth of our own reasonings by exhibiting to us the progress of other minds in the same pursuits.
6. They assist, moreover, to detect our errors into which through ignorance or inadvertence we may have fallen.
7. They also save us much time and trouble by presenting truth in a methodical and apprehensible form.
8. Books are also useful in forming the taste by presenting to us models of good writing.
9. They also enrich the mind by furnishing it with a variety of figures and illustrations, which might not have occurred to it without such aid.
10. By reading we obtain, too, a preciseness of language.
11. Books furnish an innocent pleasure which can be enjoyed in solitude.

They serve to amuse and relax the mind when fatigued with intense studies and arduous pursuits.

12. They improve the heart by presenting forcibly and impressively the motives which are adopted to excite pious affections and lead to good resolutions.

These are the principal ends which can be answered by authors, of which we should never lose sight.

In the next place I proceed to lay down some maxims which should govern us in the use of books.

1. Reading must not be substituted for thinking. Books are not properly used but abused when they are allowed to supersede the exercise of our own faculties. We must cultivate independence of mind.
2. We must not read too much. To read a great deal without exercising our own thoughts on subjects is like eating a great deal which the stomach cannot digest. The food in neither case turns to nutriment, and instead of strengthening weakens the system. Some men are constantly devouring books; without discrimination they swallow everything which comes in their way. An unnatural appetite is created, but no advantage is acquired. The man becomes little the wiser for all his reading. To burden the memory with a multitude of undigested and unanalyzed things is of no use. It would be better to leave them in books.
3. We should select with judgment and care the books which we read. Many books are worse than useless—they are pernicious. Others would be good if there were none better on the same subject; but it is a waste of time to read an inferior author when you might have access to one much more excellent. We should endeavor, therefore, to find out the merits of books on subjects in which we are interested.
4. An important species of knowledge to the student is, therefore, the character of books and what they contain. This may be obtained by conversations with the learned by reading judicious reviews—not only such as are recent, but the old; and by examining the contents and indexes of books; and, frequently, by reading a few chapters in a book we may ascertain its character.
5. All well-written books we are not bound to read—if we are already acquainted with the subject, or if we are capable of thinking for ourselves on the same, we may dispense with reading a book. Often, however, it is necessary to read so much of it as to form a judgment of its merits so that we may recommend it or affix on it our censure.
6. Many books of the most valuable kind are needed only for occasional reference.
7. Many books can only be read with profit by those whose minds are

prepared for the subject. It is, therefore, a disadvantage to read some books too soon, especially if they are never read again. In every science it is hurtful to dash into the more difficult before we have well learned the elementary parts.

8. Some books should be read not only with care but perused over and over again.
9. When a book is our own property, it is useful to mark in the margins with a pencil those passages which we wish to remember or review so that we can go over the book a second time with a glance.
10. The making of long extracts from books is of little use. If our extracts become very voluminous, it is as easy to turn to what we want in the book as in our commonplace book.<sup>6</sup> It is often sufficient to know where certain things are to be found. Facts and dates should be marked with precision, and of them it is always of advantage to make a record. But elegant expressions and fine reasonings it would be better to read again in their proper place in the authors. It will, however, often be useful to make an abstract of what we read, so far as to serve as a table of contents of the volume.
11. In regard to the form of a commonplace book, it is not of much importance. Every man can invent one to suit his own taste, or he may consult such authors as have prescribed a form.
12. By encyclopedias and dictionaries and periodical works, general knowledge is rendered more accessible than it formerly was; but on subjects in which we wish to be truly learned we must take a different course. These works have undoubtedly extended knowledge, but they have also made scholars superficial. Compendes are useful to those who have learned a science, but the more a thing is learned in detail at first, the better.
13. 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.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Commonplace books are notebooks in which readers record quotations from and notes about works they have read. They were most popular from the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> The following is crossed out in the manuscript:

We should be eclectics in regard to books, collecting the good from all quarters.

For models of exquisite compositions in prose and verse, we must still look to the Greek and Latin classics. The finest compositions of the moderns have been formed upon these models.

In the physical sciences the ancient authors are worth nothing, except to furnish some facts. The moderns here have in all respects the advantage.

In theology the moderns have advanced beyond their predecessors in some branches, especially in the knowledge of the evidences of natural and revealed religion and in biblical criticism; but in didactic and polemic theology the writers [here the section ends].

14. In our reading, we should be careful not to scatter our labors over too wide a field. We must not attempt more than we can accomplish. To become profoundly and accurately learned in every department of science is, in the present extended state of literature, too much for any man. To excel in any branch requires that many others be comparatively neglected. By aiming at too much, we become superficial in everything. There must be a division of labor, even to understand what those have done who have gone before us. Nevertheless, general knowledge is very necessary to an accomplished minister of the gospel. He should not remain wholly ignorant of any important and useful branch of human knowledge. But whilst he cultivates the field of universal science superficially, he ought to be accurately acquainted with all the learning which belongs to his own profession. Much useful knowledge may be acquired in the hours of relaxation. Follow your own authors.
15. We should be constantly on our guard lest other books lead us away from the study of the Bible or interfere in any degree with our habitual perusal of that sacred record, which contains the substance of all our theology and foundation of all our hopes. All our studies should be subordinate to that of the sacred scriptures. Better read nothing else than neglect this; other books are useful just in proportion as they aid us in understanding the Bible. No man can use too much diligence in digging in this field. It contains a treasure which never can be exhausted. Even those parts which we have studied most frequently will continue to afford us new light, if we come to them with due reverence and docility.
16. As the world is so full of books and as the number is increasing every day, it seems needful to be given in advice to young men engaged in literary pursuits not unnecessarily to increase the number of books. It is not a sufficient reason for a man to become an author that he can write well; unless he can really cast new light on some subject, it will be better for him to retain his compositions for his own use and that of his people. With many, however, there is an itch of writing and a desire to be known to the public, which induces them to commence [as] authors when they are no how qualified for the task. In most cases it is imprudent for young men to commit themselves by publishing their sentiments, for in a series of years their minds undergo a considerable change and the old man would willingly recall what the young man has said. [E.g.] *Augustine. Baxter.*

A man may be placed, however, in such circumstances as will justify his publishing his compositions although he may know that they possess no superior excellence. As, for example, when his people or his acquaintances are furnished with few books and would be more disposed to read his,

from personal attachment to the author, than others as good or better. Or when truth is in danger of suffering by the introduction of erroneous opinions which are disseminated by means of popular books or pamphlets, it may become the duty of a man to repel these attempts by publishing a refutation. Or again, if a man has made himself master of some particular branch of knowledge on which there is not in print any convenient treatise, he may become very useful by imparting his acquisitions through the medium of the press. Or finally, if a man can write sermons or tracts adapted to the capacities of common people and is able to impress into them much of the savor of true piety, he ought to write, for such books are greatly needed. But what is more useless and what more absurd than to publish discourses which contain nothing new—nothing but what may be read in hundreds of books already in the hands of the public, and especially if all their excellence consists in their being coldly orthodox or in possessing the shadow of eloquence.

17. In purchasing books, select rather such as you have not read than those with which you may be well acquainted, although you may know them to be valuable. And endeavor to buy such as are scarce if valuable in preference to others equally valuable, which are common. Sometimes it is easier to borrow a book than to buy it, not for sake of economy (for this would be meanness) but because you will use more diligence in reading it than if it were your own. Be not anxious to procure an extensive library at once, unless you are going to a place where books cannot easily be obtained. You will probably read with more care when you have a few well-chosen books than when you have before you a great number which will tend to discourage you. Your desire to read a volume will be greatly diminished if it lies on the shelf before your eyes for years before you find opportunity of perusing it. Get the best editions of every valuable work.
18. In making up a library lose no opportunity of securing such books as may be often needed for reference, such as valuable dictionaries, lexicons, et cetera.
19. As I have mentioned the borrowing of books, I would take occasion to censure the too common 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.
20. Accustom yourselves to attend with care to the preservation of all useful books which you use, whether they are your own or the property of others. In order to do this, habituate yourselves to keep all the books which you have about you in good order. Let each one have its proper station, and when you have finished reading at any time, let the author be respectfully returned to his appropriate place. I have seldom known a

person who profited much by books who treated them rudely. A real scholar contracts a friendship for the very volume which has contributed to his information and edification. It is indeed provoking to see how some persons deface and injure valuable books, especially when they belong to others. Benevolence should lead them to hand down unimpaired to posterity every means of useful instruction enjoyed by themselves.

21. Converse together on the subjects of your reading. Much benefit may be derived from this practice. 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. The collision of minds is often like that of flint and steel, productive of a spark of light which otherwise would have continued latent. By means of the ideas of others we are often led to views which they do not possess and are wiser. But to render such discussions useful or even safe, they 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.<sup>8</sup>
22. 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. Habituate yourselves to ejaculatory prayer in the midst of your studies. 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.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Point 22 appears before point 21 in the manuscript.

<sup>9</sup> The following appears at the bottom of the last page of the manuscript:  
 To know Christ, the Messiah of God, this is eternal life.  
 To know Christ crucified includes or supersedes all other knowledge.