

Schlax, Silas  
Early Moderns: Old Western Culture, 11:00 am  
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### **Christian's Should Read Old Book To Navigate Culture**

"I do not need to read old, dusty books. There's no point in learning that!" This is the mindset today, predominantly in the younger generation—but are they right? Do their arguments have any substantial weight against their opposition? Or is their thinking flawed, and in fact one should read old books? Should Christians and secularists treat this topic differently, or the same? This essay aims to address these questions meaningfully. Therefore, Christians should read old books to enhance their understanding and view of cultures of the past in order to better navigate today's culture.<sup>1</sup>

What are old books? They are books of the past, books that have survived the trials of time. The longer a book has existed, the more generations have tested and tried it, hence meaning it must have some worth in reading. Whether it be philosophy, politics, stories, poetry, or theology, it all has some worth or echo of the truth.<sup>2</sup> While some texts will have a greater value or impact than others, they are all worth reading to give one a better understanding of what the Lord, and his world, are like.

But why should one read them? The question is why not, not why. If one does read old books, one is not only reading it for the betterment of themselves but also for society, for one's children, and for the next generation. As Dr. Scott Postma says in his article "The Right Kind of Education": "Education is not job training. It is the cultivation of wisdom and the preparation of

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Scott Postma, *Christianity and Culture; Recovering Christian Humanism in the twenty-first century* (class lectures, Kepler Education, Moscow ID, Full Year 2023-2024).

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Scott Postma, *The Romans: Old Western Culture* (class lectures, Kepler Education, Moscow ID, Full Year 2022-2023).

the individual to be virtuous through the long task of transferring the knowledge, traditions, and mores of one generation to the next.”<sup>3</sup> Reading old books is not only the backbone of one's own personal understanding, but also for the generations to come. Now, while one might not understand everything they read the first time, it is still worth reading, as you will acquire something from it. This is also where education comes in, as one needs proper training in order to ask the right questions of the text at hand. Like Plato said in *The Republic*: “Then you will make a law that they shall have such an education as will enable them to attain the greatest skill in asking and answering questions?”<sup>4</sup> Plato sees that there is an important skill in both asking and answering questions, which takes not only practice but also instruction as education.

Before one can begin to understand how reading old books can shape one's view of culture, they need to understand how postmodern culture got where it is today. Regardless of what secularists say, postmodern culture has very deep roots in Christianity and Christian Humanism.<sup>5</sup> Jens Zimmermann says it this way, “Without religion, the West would not be where it is, and without understanding the religious roots of Western culture and their continuing influence on Western thought, we lack the self-understanding necessary to address our current cultural crisis.”<sup>6</sup> As Zimmermann emphasizes, without religion, the culture would be weak, and “lack the self-understanding” needed to address and solve cultural crises. But can any religion fulfill this void? Man's inherent desire to worship is natural, but without Christ, it is fleeting. In Zimmermann's closing words, he states that, “we should recover the early church's spirit of

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<sup>3</sup> “The Right Kind of Education,” Scott Postma, last modified July 7, 2021, <https://scottpostma.net/2021/07/01/the-right-kind-of-education/>.

<sup>4</sup> Plato, “The Republic,” trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *The Philosophers: Old Western Culture*, vol. 4, eds. Daniel Foucachon and Wesley J. Callihan (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2017), 488.

<sup>5</sup> Postma, *Christianity and Culture*, 2024–2025.

<sup>6</sup> Jens Zimmermann, *International Humanism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 26.

passionate engagement with culture based on the mystery of the incarnation.”<sup>7</sup> Culture without roots in Christ and the Incarnation is like paper on fire—quickly burned and rendered to ash. A culture with its roots in the Incarnation will result in not only a flourishing environment but also books and writings grounded in Christianity.

By reading books from authors who lived during these times of flourishing and suffering, one can understand what went wrong, what went right, what needs to be changed, and what needs to be restored. Reading people like Milton, Luther, Galileo, Pascal, Mohler and more, one can begin to grasp both the culture's past and one's own. Nevertheless, there will always be those who reject Christ and in return create their own “religion” that fits them. This is where Walker Percy, in his work, *The Message in the Bottle*, comes in handy. Later in his work, he outlines the difference between knowledge and news: imagine being a castaway who lost all their memories. If they were to find a bottle with a note in it, how could they determine if it was true or false?<sup>8</sup> This is where the knowledge versus news comes in. Knowledge is something one can come to on their own, like “water boils at 100 degrees at sea level”<sup>9</sup>, but news is something one can not determine if it is true or not without experiencing it, like “There is fresh water in the next cove.”<sup>8</sup> But one then runs into a dilemma: how can you “experience” Christ, to know it is true? This is where Nietzsche and his peers, who famously proclaimed “God is Dead,” faltered. However, there is a straightforward solution. One can experience Christ through the incarnation, the Eucharist, and his mercy and grace, because Christ reveals himself to those who seek.<sup>10</sup> By

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<sup>7</sup> Zimmermann, *International Humanism*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Walker Percy, “The Message in The Bottle” in *Readings in Christian Humanism*, eds. Joseph M. Shaw, R.W. Franklin, Harris Kaasa, and Charles W. Buzicky (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 588-612.

<sup>9</sup> Percy, “The Message”, 594.

<sup>10</sup> Postma, *Christianity and Culture*, 2024–2025.

reading old books, one can get a better understanding of who Christ is, and as a bonus, also grasp the current cultural crises.

To effectively navigate postmodern culture, one must first grasp one's own view of both past and current culture, what makes it tick, its backbone, and more. For Christians, this is simple. The Incarnation is the backbone. It is what has shaped and formed postmodern culture. But why does one need to navigate postmodern culture? Additionally, what about spreading the Gospel, or creating disciples? Without understanding the culture one lives in and how to navigate it, how can one make a persuasive argument against it? This is where Christian Humanists focus their time. The point of Christian Humanism is to affirm human life and culture through the Christian tradition.<sup>11</sup> R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw say it this way: "In the humanism created by the gospel of Christ, men and women and children discover a God who affirms their full humanity in the midst of weakness and suffering, not one who makes divine love conditional upon human success."<sup>12</sup> Once one can begin to understand the problems at hand, then and only then can one start to navigate postmodern culture, and in return, try to recover what has been lost.

Once you accept that, one needs to understand culture to navigate it. How does reading old books help? As stated above, postmodern culture has its roots in the Incarnation, but also in the past cultures. Take, for example, how the idea of punishments has changed throughout time. In Biblical times, one would be stoned to death for lashing out against their mother. In the early nineteenth-century, one could be corporeally punished for being rude to a teacher in school. Now, touching a child could land one in prison. Regardless of how time has changed cultures' views or acceptable practices, these things are in its roots, it is part of what defines their identity. Despite

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<sup>11</sup> R. William Franklin and Joseph M. Shaw, "What is Christian Humanism," in *The Case for Christian Humanism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 3-14.

<sup>12</sup> Franklin and Shaw, *The Case for Christian Humanism*, 4.

what secularists say, postmodern culture has its roots in the Incarnation, in history, and in old books. These roots can be discovered by reading old books, reading works by old theologians and philosophers. The more one enhances their proverbial database of knowledge, the more equipped one will be to handle the harsh and cruel postmodern culture.

Finally, the age-old question, “Why me?” As Jewish Scholar Hillel said: “If not you, then who? If not now, when?”<sup>13</sup> It is the Christian’s duty to spread the gospel, like it says in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” To spread the gospel to all nations, one must read old books to not only increase one's own understanding, but then be equipped to share it with others. And to do this effectively, especially in the postmodern culture of America, one must understand the culture, how it came into existence, what has influenced it, and why it promotes what it promotes—rationalism, atheism, materialism, etc. Without these, it's like swimming in a boundless ocean with no bottom or shore—leaving the unprepared vulnerable to being overwhelmed and consumed by the tides of culture.

Old books, the physical copies of the past, hold the secrets to society and culture, passing wisdom and knowledge from generations past. Readers should approach these almost sacred items with tremendous care and thoughtfulness, not only to enhance their own understanding, view of culture, and ability to navigate it, but also to benefit those who surround them. Old books are for all, not only the smart, or the rich, or the powerful, rather all men and women alike. In conclusion, to effectively navigate the culture today, all people should read old books for a better understanding and view of cultures' past.

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<sup>13</sup> Hillel the Elder, "If not you, then who? If not now, when?", source unknown.

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