Reading Pagan Books

To the Christian the word ‘pagan’ often conjures up images of human sacrifices and books about bloody rituals. But that is not at all what is meant by the term ‘pagan’ with respect to their literature. The pagan books may consist of books on cookery to books on philosophy – but no matter what category a Christian may choose, he will always find something to aid him in many aspects of life. Christians are, in and of themselves, no more special than a pagan; without God Christians are no better off. Thus it is that with regard to worldly – yet important – issues of life, pagans may have just as good or better insight on the said topic. A Christian, then, ought to take up and read the pagan books, because of the great gems of truth contained therein.

For practical reasons, firstly, a Christian should read pagan literature. Because religion does not, of necessity apply itself to basic subjects such as gardening, cooking, or carpentry, a Christian may boldly read such books without any essential difference between the Christian-written equivalents.

Of those books which deal in philosophy, St. Basil says that they reflect truth like a mirror. By using evil, corrupted sinners, God can reflect his truth – an abstract principle that is not some special truth for Christians – very vividly indeed. God has granted these men his *common* *grace*, a grace of temporal knowledge, that he may use them to teach his people his fundamental truths. Christians are caught up in trying to please their Savior and as a result will often shun or skip over even most basic of doctrines. But these pagan authors record these dogmas very carefully, and only by reading them can Christians be reminded of these important realities.

In the same way, if a Christian intently studies and examines pagan philosophy, he is thereby enabled to refute its argument. For this reason the apostle Peter writes of false prophets in the second book of his second epistle, in order to warn his fellow believers of the heretical deceit and beliefs that had entered the church.

On the other hand, older pagan books contain precisely that jewel of knowledge which the current culture lacks. By reading these pagan authors knowledge currently lacking is revealed.

Once revealed, this knowledge which is at first, so peculiar and novel to the culture, will work the magic of truth upon the knowledge already attained, and give Christians yet greater and more amazing truths than those they have, and those they have will be made greater.

For this reason C.S Lewis has said that by reading older, pagan literature we may more truly understand new or Christian books. For these pagan authors do not try to convince, necessarily, their audience, they wish to find the truth and show it to us. Thus the pagan authors often express basic truths in simple, succinct sentences that by far more beneficial to the young Christian than lengthy theological papers expounding on one simple theme.

When these pagan authors expressed basic truths ‘in a nutshell,’ they expressed truths about virtue. To them, virtue was the be-all, end-all. They spent their lives trying to find it, and when they found it they told it to people. Sometimes Christians become too licentious, becoming legalistic *about* legalism. Virtue is no longer worth anything, they say. And while God’s grace truly is that alone which saves anyone, Christians ought to respond to that grace with *virtue*. Since these pagan authors were caught up their whole life in expounding upon virtue, they are a great source of knowledge on virtue. The pagan authors hold in store for any wandering mind that comes to them many great gems of truth and doctrine.

And it is for this very reason that God has instituted them for the use of his people. But not only does he institute, he upholds. These pagan writings have stood the test of God’s sovereign tool, time.

If, then, these pagan writings have been carried throughout time, extolling virtue, strengthening knowledge, shedding light, and offering truth, how can a Christian pass over them? Let the Christian read these pearls of knowledge and treasure it, yet share it. Truly God uses them to show us his attributes and teach us to imitate Him.