

On the Writing of Book Reviews

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ON THE WRITING OF BOOK REVIEWS

Editor's Note: Recently, [Dr. James Hamilton](#), a prolific writer and a well-regarded professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's [Harvard School for Theological Studies](#) in Houston, Texas, was queried about his penchant for writing book reviews. The editors of [BaptistTheology.org](#) were impressed with his responses, and asked him to expand upon that interview. He graciously agreed to do so. We hope you will be encouraged in your own reading and writing by what Dr. Hamilton believes regarding the reading of books and the writing of book reviews as a spiritual exercise. Moreover, as [BaptistTheology.org](#) launches its new [Book Review Page](#), Dr. Hamilton's interview helps explain why conversations about books are so vital.

For whom are book reviews written?

Book reviews are for others. Everything we do is for the glory of God. Those of us who have received the faith once for all entrusted to the saints and are called to Christian ministry have an obligation to shepherd the flock of God. This means that we read and write for the glory of God in the strength that he supplies, taking every thought captive to the knowledge of Christ, subjecting everything to the searchlight of Scripture, wherein God has revealed himself. When we honor God's written revelation of himself, we honor God. Insofar as we despise the Word of the Lord, we despise the Lord.

Under God, book reviews are mainly for other people. Just as Christ, who was rich, became poor that we might be rich, so also those who follow Christ will honor him by serving others. Serving others may mean pointing them to the green pastures of a great book, or helping them to understand a difficult topic through a summary that gets to the heart of the issue. It may also mean raising questions that keep the sheep from wandering away, or sounding an alarm to prevent them from grazing in the desert. So, for whom are book reviews written?

Book reviews are written for the author of the book. An author spends a long time writing a book in the hope that people will read it and benefit from it. The reviews he receives—particularly from those who don't know him personally—let him know how others regard his book. So, in a real sense, someone who writes a book review is honoring the service done by the author of the book and then serving him in return.

Book reviews are also written for other scholars and students working in the same field of inquiry. No one can read everything that is written. A book review can help alert those who haven't read the book to its salient features and the contribution it makes to the wider discussion. It can let others know whether or not this is a book they need to read.

Book reviews are written for pastors and scholars who study other things. Pastors and scholars must have a breadth as well as a depth in their reading, and book reviews are a quick way for them to be introduced to unfamiliar fields that may prompt their further

investigation. A broad awareness of what people are thinking can be gained by reading helpful book reviews.

Book reviews are also written for publishers. A publisher can gauge the response to a book he took the risk of publishing by reading reviews of the book. This helps publishers stay abreast of the scholarly discussion, and it helps them to know whether they want to publish other things this author may write.

Book reviews can also serve the constituency that the author represents. A negative example would be an author who betrays the confessional position of his constituency, which may not read scholarly books. A book review can alert members of the constituency to the fact that they may need to take the time to familiarize themselves with the views of this author, with whom they may need to have further conversations. On the positive side, a glowing review can help the members of the constituency, who may not move in scholarly circles, see how much the scholarly community appreciates this author who represents them in other arenas.

A book review serves those who will read the review, but it also serves the soul who writes the review. Writing a review pushes the reviewer to understand the thoughts of another person, summarize those thoughts accurately, and seek to serve others in the writing of the review.

For what should readers of a book review look?

There are a lot of factors that influence the answer to this question. If it is a really controversial book, such as E. P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, some early reviews raised great questions about Sanders's thesis (I'm thinking particularly of the review by G. B. Caird, who noted that while Sanders argues that Paul's contemporaries weren't legalistic, one certainly gets the impression of legalism from a document such as the Mishnah). Similarly, a good review can help us see what is or is not helpful in books written by controversial figures such as N. T. Wright. Speaking colloquially, those who are inclined to drink the Wright kool-aid might be cautioned by a wise word in a review. Those who think Wright is wrong on everything might be encouraged to see what they can learn from Wright even as they "test everything" and "hold onto what is good."

Book reviews also tell us about where the reviewers are theologically. For instance, comparing several reviews of Peter Enns's book *Inspiration and Incarnation* will give some insight into the reviewer's stance on the inerrancy of Scripture. Consider, for instance, the careful and thorough reviews written by Greg Beale (who finds Enns's work to be *very* problematic) as compared with some other reviewers who are much more positive on what Enns has to say. Wisdom cries aloud in the streets. We can tell how people feel about a doctrine such as inerrancy by examining their response to proposals like the one Enns puts forward.

What elements do you consider in a book when contemplating a review?

Some books I review because a journal or a publisher asks me to do so. But most of the time I review books that interest me for various reasons. It could be a topic about which I am writing or hope to write about (right now I'm working on the center of

biblical theology and hope to eventually work more on the Messiah in the OT), or it might be an issue I need to think about for ministry or family reasons (books like Voddie Baucham's *Family Driven Faith*). I have a strong interest in history, so writing reviews on books like Anthony Chute's *A Piety Above the Common Standard* or Tom Nettles's *The Baptists* gives me an opportunity to read and think carefully about our heritage. Some reviews I write because I feel called to hold firmly to the trustworthy word as taught, giving instruction in sound doctrine and seeking to refute those who contradict (Tit 1:9)—such as the long one on Tiessen's *Who Can Be Saved?*

Do you have a standard outline you try to follow for different types of reviews—for example, single author books, compilations, and reference works?

It depends on whether the book review is for my blog or for a journal. If it's for my blog, I think people like shorter blog entries: an entry of less than 1,000 words is good, but an entry of less than 500 words is even better. So, in books I only review for my blog, I am trying quickly to point out the book's significance and state who would be interested in it and why.

If the book is for a journal, the review will usually be a little longer (800 to 1200 words), but I do have a general strategy: state who the author is and why the book is significant, summarize the book's contents, then interact with it. The interaction is going to include things I do or don't agree with in the book. And then in the last brief paragraph I try to situate this book against other similar books and make a comment on who might be interested in it and why.

When grading a student's review, what are necessary elements for making a high grade?

As a professor, I am looking for proof that the student has read and understood the book, and then I am looking to see whether they have followed the instructions I have given them. Their instructions are to follow the format I gave regarding book reviews for journals in the previous answer.

What are your general suggestions regarding such issues as the reviewer's tone, the length of the review, writing for your audience, and providing critiques? Do you have any other suggestions?

When reviewing books, we should seek to honor the Lord, pursue godliness, tell the truth, and serve the people who will read the review.

I think that the more conscious we are of living before God, the easier it will be to honor him. The more time we spend in his Word, meditating on its meaning, the easier it will be for us to be conscious of his presence. We live to and for him—by whom, through whom, and for whom are all things. Our goal in writing book reviews must be to glorify God.

It seems to me that in Paul's first letter to Timothy the word "godliness" means that we relate appropriately to all people given their gender, age, status, etc. So, false

teachers are to be rebuked, younger men are to be treated as brothers, younger women as sisters, older women as mothers, and older men are not to be answered sharply but like fathers. The elders of the church are to be respected, and charges are only received against them on the evidence of two or three witnesses. Keeping things like this in mind will help us write appropriate things in book reviews, which is what it means to be godly, and this will honor the Lord.

Sometimes people in our culture are so fixated on being nice that they will not tell the truth. If a book is bad, we should find a way lovingly but appropriately to say so in a godly way. If we refuse to tell the truth, we are not honoring the Lord and the people reading the review will not be well served.

Writing book reviews should be regarded by Christians as a service done for others. It is a ministry. We do not write for ourselves. We are not the point. God is the point. We seek his honor, and we seek to love his people well by writing reviews that will benefit them.

Regarding your personal study, how do you decide what to read and what not to read both devotionally and academically?

Devotionally, I try to read a page or a page and a half of the Hebrew Bible every day (BHS). Sometimes it will be less if I am in a section that is more difficult, such as prophecy or the Psalms, where there are more words I do not recognize. I also try to read a chapter of the Greek New Testament every day. That is the goal. It does not always happen. As for the passages I pick, if I am preaching on the coming Sunday, I will try to read the passage to be preached every day of that week. I usually decide to preach on passages that I want to spend more time studying.

As for devotional reading outside the Bible, I like substantial things that point me to the majesty and grandeur of God. Right now I am slowly making my way through David Wells's *Losing Our Virtue*. I am also pecking away at Dallimore's biography of Whitefield, Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*, Lloyd Jones's *Preaching and Preachers* . . . and there is a whole list of books I am eager to read.

Academically, of course, I review what I am interested in, or what I feel I must read, or things that directly impinge upon different projects that my work requires. For instance, I have agreed to write an essay on the Lord's Supper, so I need to do some more reading on that topic in coming days.

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