Around the middle of December, I always look forward to reading the lists of favorite books from the previous year. Ministries such as Desiring God and the Gospel Coalition, as well as evangelical pastors and authors who blog, put out a list of books that they found most helpful or enjoyable during the past twelve months. Here is a link to a collection of them:

I enjoy these lists not only because it’s interesting to find out what books others have benefited from, but also because I find out about books I may not have heard of or not thought of reading – then I put them on my list to read next year. Since I always enjoy reading these, I thought I would put together a list of my favorite books from 2016. Maybe you’ll find it helpful or learn about a book or two that you’d like to read. This list isn’t meant to be an objective list of best books published in 2016, but simply the books I most enjoyed reading this year, as well as benefited from the most. They were not all published in 2016; these are just the favorite ones I read this year, regardless of when they were published.

10) *Mere Christianity: A Biography* (by George Marsden). This isn’t a biography of a person – C.S. Lewis, but a book – *Mere Christianity*. C.S. Lewis gave the broadcast talks that were later collected into book form as *Mere Christianity* during some of the darkest days of World War II on the BBC in London. George Marsden, perhaps the premier Christian historian in America, tells the fascinating story of how Lewis, an Oxford don, served as an apologist and even an evangelist during the war years in Britain – not only on the air to the British nation as a whole, but also throughout the country to soldiers and airmen at RAF bases. He also examines what has made *Mere Christianity* perhaps the most influential Christian book of the last century, and how it has been used in the lives of many, many people. Speaking for myself, there was no book outside of the Bible that helped me more in my understanding of the Christian faith in high school and early in college than this book. Many of its classic defenses of the deity of Christ, of the failures of a materialistic/evolutionary view of the universe to account for morality and truth, and his use of metaphors and images to bring the meaning of truth to life, all helped me not be shaken by the intellectual challenges that young people face during that time of life. A sampler: “I believe in Christianity (we might say, the Christian faith or the truth of God’s word) like I believe the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

9) *Lectures on Calvinism* by Abraham Kuyper. Given in 1898, a few years before Kuyper became Prime Minister of the Netherlands, these densely packed talks show the practical relevance of the biblical conviction of “the sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole cosmos” (Kuyper). What does that mean for religion, for politics, for science, for art, for the future of the world, for life itself? That’s what Kuyper seeks to set forth here, both with fascinating insights into Western history as well as great contemporary relevance (even now!). These lectures were the first to speak of what we know as a “Christian worldview.” A sample: “Where man may stand, whatever he may do, to whatever he may apply his hand, in agriculture, in commerce, and in industry, or his mind, in the world of art, and science, he is, in whatsoever it may be, constantly standing before the face of his God, he is employed in the service of his God, he has strictly to obey his God, and above all, he has to aim at the glory of his God.”

8) *Conscience* by Andy Naselli & J.D. Crowley. Paul wrote Romans 14 for a reason: every church throughout time will have believers whose consciences differ on whether certain practices, issues, and choices are pleasing to the Lord or not. For instance, how should we treat Sunday? Should Christians listen to secular music or not? What should we think about global warming? Hip-hop music? Santa Claus and Christmas trees? Drinking alcohol in moderation? How many children should married couples have? How should they be schooled? This book is not simply about those issues and the questions related to them. But it does give a solid biblical grounding for what the conscience is, how we can train it, and how we can love those who differ (as the subtitle of the book states). This is an excellent book by a Bible professor (Naselli) and a missionary (J.D. Crowley, who has been in one of the *Dispatches from the Front* DVD’s) that addresses all those things with biblical clarity and practical wisdom. The chapter by Crowley on relating to people of other cultures when your consciences disagree is well worth reading, and perhaps the most eye-opening in the book. It gives helpful insight into how in America we often think we view the world “normally,” whereas the perspectives that we take for granted are sometimes viewed quite differently in other parts of the world. This book is packed with good things – I highly recommend it.

7) *1944: FDR and the Year that Changed History* by Jay Winik. For World War II history buffs, this book lies in the “must” column. What did the leaders of the Allied Powers know about the Holocaust, how much did they know, how early did they know it, and what more could they have done to prevent it? Read this book to find out. And among the “big three” of Roosevelt, Stalin, and Churchill, which leader displayed the most resolve and moral courage in the face of unmistakable evil? This book gives a surprising answer. I think I sprinted through this book faster than any other book this year. His writing makes history come to life, but even more, it is his stark moral clarity in laying bare the true nature of what went on during the closing years of the war that is both shocking and may make you weep.

6) *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of Leviticus* by Michael Morales. This was certainly the most rich and profound book on any part of the Bible I read this year, packed with exegetical gold. There’s a reason why Leviticus stands at the heart, the very center, of the five books Moses wrote, and this book gives the reason why: “The Pentateuch itself is a thoroughly Levitical work, a priestly Torah, whose author, Moses, was a thoroughgoing Levite (Ex. 2:12, 6:14-27). Its dominating concern, as well as that of the rest of the Bible, is the way in which humanity may come to dwell in the house of God…Entering the house of God to dwell with God, beholding, glorifying and enjoying Him eternally, I suggest, is *the* story of the Bible...so the primary theme and theology of Leviticus (and of the Pentateuch as a whole) is YHWH’s opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence.”

5) *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius. For a number of years now, I’ve wanted to read during the Advent season Athanasius’ classic work (written about 335 A.D.) on why the Son of God became man. So this year, I finally took the plunge. It’s actually not a very long book, written in the form of a letter to a younger believer, seeking to strengthen them in the faith during a time when the Arian heresy (a denial of Christ’s full deity) was beginning to infiltrate the church. One reason why it’s good to read an older book like this is that it’s encouraging to the soul to realize (once again) that believers in the early centuries of the church believed exactly the same truths about Christ as we do – they just expressed them in different ways. It works the other way around too: we believe and confess the same truths they did. This book is a classic for a reason. An appetizer from the full banquet: “The achievements of the Savior, resulting from his becoming man, are of such kind and number that if one should wish to number them, he may be compared to men who gaze at the expanse of the sea and wish to count its waves. For as one cannot take in the whole of the waves with his eyes, so for him that would take in all the achievements of Christ in the body, it is impossible to take in the whole…for all alike are marvelous, and wherever a man turns his glance, he may behold the deity of the Word, and be struck with exceeding great awe.”

4) *Evangelicalism Divided* by Iain Murray. If you want to understand the last half century of evangelical history in both the USA and UK, this is the book to read. Beginning around the 1940’s and 1950’s a new evangelicalism emerged out of fundamentalism that seemed to hold great promise. And while much good was accomplished in the half century between 1950 and the early 2000’s, Iain Murray (one of my favorite authors) shines a light on some of the unforeseen consequences of an evangelicalism that at times has downplayed the importance of doctrine, operated by pragmatism rather than truth, pursued unity with those who have fundamentally different understandings of how someone becomes a Christian (think Evangelicals and Catholics together, whose seeds were sown much earlier), and over-reacted to a perceived strict fundamentalism. The need of the hour is to be clear on what true conversion is – how someone becomes a Christian and what a Christian is: in other words, biblical Christianity. This is a timely narrative, well told, that will brace you and give you a longing to be faithful to the truth in our own day.

3) *Theology of the Reformers* by Timothy George. This is certainly my favorite book I have read on the Reformation. With vivid writing, great stories, and profound theological insight into the major Reformers and the movements that grew from them, this is a wonderful book to read in view of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation next year. There is hardly a boring page in this book! Most moving of all was the chapter on Menno Simons and the Anabaptists, and the letter one mother wrote to her infant daughter – whom she gave birth to in prison – while awaiting execution: “My dear lamb, who are yet very little and young, I herewith bid you adieu…Follow me and your father, and be not ashamed to confess our faith before the world, and this adulterous generation. Let it be your glory, that we did not die for any evil doing, and strive to do likewise, though they should also seek to kill you. And on no account cease to love God above all, for no one can prevent you from fearing God. If you follow that which is good, and seek peace, and pursue it, you shall receive the crown of eternal life; this crown I wish you – and the crucified, bleeding, naked, despised, rejected and slain Jesus Christ for your bridegroom.”

2) *The First American Evangelical: A Short Life of Cotton Mather* by Rick Kennedy. Cotton Mather, a pastor in Boston in the latter part of the 1600’s and early 1700’s, has got to be one of the most interesting men in American history. And this well-written and at times deeply moving and even hilarious book shows why. His aim was to promote “an all-day-long faith…at the very top of Christianity,” by his “radical Scripturalism,” and constant communication (in prayer) with “a lively and social God.”

1) *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* by George Marsden. It took me 13 years to finish this book – let that be an encouragement to you in your own reading! I started it in the fall of 2003 in college, when through the writings of Jonathan Edwards I was beginning to see the true beauty of Christ in the gospel. But I stopped reading the book after a week or two, because I was eager to read more of Edwards himself, not just read about him. Then I picked it up again this September, and finally finished it, 13 years after I started. I don’t know why it took me so long, since this was maybe the best biography I have ever read. I was honestly sad when it was over. A wonderful book to read during the long winter months.

*Two honorable mentions:* I couldn’t leave these two out: *Zeal Without Burnout* is a great short book on “sustainable sacrifice” in life and ministry (we have a copy of this in the entry way of the church). And *“Free Grace” Theology: Five Ways it Diminishes the Gospel* is a really helpful book by Wayne Grudem that answers the questions of whether the gospel message should include a call for people to repent of their sins, and whether evidence of a changed life is an important indication of whether a person is truly born again. These are vital issues, and Grudem answers them with biblical clarity and pastoral conviction.

Were there any books you read this year that were particularly meaningful or enjoyable for you? If so, feel free to share them with the rest of the church family.

Thanks for reading this far, and may God enrich and bless you in your own reading!

Pastor Daniel