

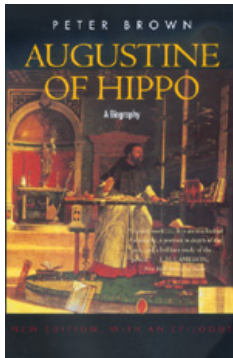
Ten Great Christian Biographies

Monday, April 16, 2007

We read biographies because worthy portraits of our fellow human beings help us to make sense of the world. We are especially fascinated by the lives of those who have made a difference in the world — whose mark remains visible even now. The lives of the famous and the infamous make for compelling reading.

As Benjamin Disraeli, a famous author as well as Queen Victoria's favorite Prime Minister, once remarked, biography is "life without theory." In other words, at their best biographies take us into the real lives of real persons as they were really lived. No life can be reduced to a written biography, of course, and no biography can consider all aspects of even a single life. Every biographer picks and chooses from the available data of a life. Nevertheless, we are drawn into these lives as we read compelling biographies.

Reading the biographies of persons whose lives represent a significant influence on the Christian church is especially enriching. Each of the biographies listed below invites the reader into an adventure that is both literary and theological. These are ten of the biographies I consider most important from recent decades. They are listed in chronological order rather than by ranked importance.

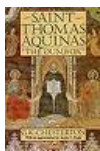


Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1967, revised edition 2000.

Brown's rendering of Augustine is essential reading for the Christian serious about the history of the church. His revised edition makes use of valuable materials discovered since the book's first edition was published in 1967. Rollins Professor of History at Princeton University, Brown reveals the genius of Augustine and takes us into his inner life and historical context. One cannot understand the Reformers without understanding the influence of Augustine on their theology and, specifically, their understandings of sin and grace.

Excerpt:

Not every man lives to see the fundamentals of his life's work challenged in his old age. Yet this is what happened to Augustine during the Pelagian controversy. At the time that the controversy opened, he had reached a plateau. He was already enmeshed in a reputation that he attempted to disown with characteristic charm: "Cicero, the prince of Roman orators," he wrote to Marcellinus in 412, "says of someone that 'He never uttered a word which he would wish to recall.' High praise indeed! — but more applicable to a complete ass than to a genuinely wise man If God permit me, I shall gather and point out, in a work specially devoted to this purpose, all the things which justly displease me in my books: then men will see that I am far from being a biased judge in my own case. . . . For I am the sort of man who writes because he has made progress, and who makes progress — by writing."



G. K. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas Aquinas — "The Dumb Ox"* (New York: Doubleday, 1933/1956).

Chesterton's biographical portrait of Aquinas is masterful — as such because Chesterton wrote it as well as because it is about the most significant figure in medieval Christianity. This is a brilliant exercise in biography, and the most accessible way to understand Aquinas and his thought.

Excerpt:

Of the personal habits that go with the personal physique, we have also a few convincing and confirming impressions. When he was not sitting still, reading a book, he walked round and round the cloisters and walked fast and even furiously, a very characteristic action of men who fight their battles in the mind. Whenever he was interrupted, he was very polite and more apologetic than the apologizer. But there was that about him, which suggested that he was rather happier when he was not interrupted. He was ready to stop his truly Peripatetic tramp: but we feel that when he resumed it, he walked all the faster.

ABINGDON CLASSICS

Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1950).

*Here
I Stand*
A Life of Martin Luther



Roland H. Bainton
Excellent, illuminating and eloquent
The New York Times

If just starting to read Christian biography, start here. Bainton has written what must be the last century's most popular and accessible biography of a Christian figure — at least among evangelicals. Luther comes alive through Bainton's words, and in *Here I Stand* we find Luther in all his greatness, warts and all.

Excerpt:

Katie soon had more than Luther to think about. On October 21, 1525, Luther confided to a friend, "My Katherine is fulfilling Genesis 1:28." On May 26, 1526, he wrote to another, "There is about to be born a child of a monk and a nun. Such a child must have a great Lord for a godfather. Therefore I am inviting you. I cannot be precise as to the time." On the eighth of June went out the news, "My dear Katie brought into the world yesterday by God's grace at two o'clock a little son, Hans Luther. I must stop. Sick Katie calls me." When the baby was bound in swaddling clothes, Luther said, "Kick, little fellow. That is what the pope did to me, but I got loose." The next entry in Hans's curriculum vitae was this: "Hans is cutting his teeth and beginning to make a joyous nuisance of himself. These are the joys of marriage of which the pope is not worthy." On the arrival of a daughter Luther wrote to a prospective godmother, "Dear lady, God has produced from me and my wife a little heathen. We hope you will be willing to become her spiritual mother and help make her a Christian."

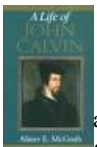


David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

This is a remarkable biography of a remarkable man. As Daniell recounts, we all stand in Tyndale's debt in ways most of us never consider. A martyr for the faith, a translator of incalculable genius, and a life at the center of a great epoch — in William Tyndale we meet a man who literally gave his life for the furtherance of the Word. Incredibly, no biography of Tyndale emerged in the six decades prior to Daniell's work. His biography was worth the wait.

Excerpt:

That is Tyndale's first page; it is possible for a late twentieth-century reader to see it as unexceptional, even mild, and ever rather over-obvious, and to begin to patronise Tyndale. Yet the page, printed in English in 1525, contained high explosive. Inside the reasonableness of tone, stating the need for a New Testament in English as, to borrow a phrase, a truth universally acknowledged; a truth so obvious that it would be superfluous to explain, and only those who were blind or malicious or mad could deny it, as it would be mad to say that the Bible in English would cause evil, darkness and lying — inside that mildness was an attack on the Church so dangerous that it could only be countered by the most vicious burnings, of books and men and women. These first sentences of Tyndale have a calm that suggests that Tyndale himself does not understand yet that this work, and he himself, will be answered with hatred and burning.



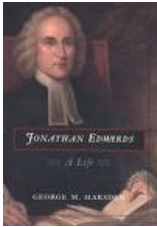
Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (London: Blackwell, 1993).

Oddly enough, John Calvin has not attracted the same volume of biographical attention that has collected around Martin Luther. This is a lack that cries out for attention, especially given the grotesque distortions of Calvin's life and thought that prevail in so many quarters. Alister McGrath's *A Life of John Calvin* is the best biography available at present, and it is well crafted for both academic and non-academic readers.

Excerpt:

His importance lies primarily, but by no means exclusively, in his being a religious thinker. To describe him as a

'theologian' is proper but misleading, given the modern associations of the term. A theologian is one who is generally seen to be marginalized as an irrelevance by church and academy alike, whose public is limited to a severely restricted circle of fellow theologians, and whose ideas and methods are generally derived from other intellectual disciplines. The originality, power and influence of Calvin's religious ideas forbid us to speak of him merely as a 'theologian' — though that he certainly was — in much the same way it is inadequate to refer to Lenin as a mere political theorist. Through his remarkable ability to master languages, media and ideas, his insights into the importance of organization and social structures, and his intuitive grasp of the religious needs and possibilities of his era, Calvin was able to forge an alliance between religious thought and action which made Calvinism a wonder of its age.



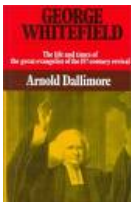
George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

Yale University Press continues its invaluable service in publishing the collected works of America's greatest theologian — a project that continues to amaze, volume by worthy volume. With George Marsden's biography of Edwards, the press has now published the most important biographical work on Edwards to be released in recent decades as well. The work is massive (How could it be otherwise?) and bold.

Excerpt:

Jonathan's exhilarating reading of Locke, Newton, and a host of other modern thinkers convinced him that he stood at a pivotal point in New England's history. This sense grew out of his personal experience. During the early years of such reading, his orthodoxy stood on shaky ground. Almost all modern thinkers professed a defended Christianity; yet virtually all, like Locke, endorsed a broader, more tolerant, and more "reasonable" religion than Jonathan had learned in Connecticut. As a young teenager he had thought of many reasons to doubt the Calvinist teaching of the total sovereignty of God, and these new authors may have reinforced those doubts.

Soon, however, the effect became almost the opposite. Somehow in the midst of his study and his agonizing spiritual searching, his doubts about divine sovereignty dissolved without his quite knowing why. By the time of the electrifying ecstasies of his conversion experience in the spring of his first graduate year, he was also enthralled by a sense of a special calling. He felt called to use the new learning in defense of God's eternal word.



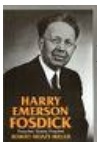
Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, 2 volumes (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970).

Dallimore's biography of Whitefield is among the greatest in terms of sheer inspiration and the urgency of Whitefield's example. Lessons from Whitefield are worth this two-volume biography and more, and Dallimore takes his readers into the heart of Whitefield's life and ministry.

Excerpt:

Open-air preaching is now so commonplace that it is difficult to realize how outlandish it seemed then. There had long been propaganda to the effect that any display of spiritual earnestness might lead to trouble — even to civil disorder — and the generality of Englishmen believed it. Public opinion confined the clergyman to a narrow area of activity, and though this might include such things as drunkenness and gambling, it left no room for evangelistic fervor. Whitefield knew that were he to preach in the fields his enemies would make loud outcry, hurling the word enthusiast, ridiculing him personally and using his action as a means of bringing the whole revival movement into disrepute.

But, being soon to return to America, Whitefield could not long delay his decision. Accordingly, shortly after his correspondence with Harris, he made up his mind: he would take the momentous step, making at least one attempt at the open-air preaching.



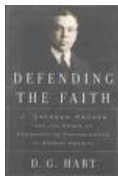
Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

A biography of twentieth-century America's most notorious liberal pastor belongs on this list? Yes — precisely for that reason. Evangelicals need to understand why Modernism and Liberalism attracted so many

followers, and what happened to the liberal churches and denominations as a result. All of the other figures on this list would be in agreement in judging Harry Emerson Fosdick to be a heretic — and they would be right. In his fascinating biography of Fosdick, Miller takes us into the culture and mind of liberal Protestantism through the life of its most influential preacher. Evangelicals reading this biography will recognize that many of Fosdick's most dangerous ideas are appearing once more, sometimes from the mouths and pens of some who claim to be evangelicals — as Fosdick also claimed to be.

Excerpt:

For Fosdick, the Bible cannot always be taken literally, but it should always be taken seriously. For Fosdick, the Bible is not a revelation from God, but it is a revelation of God. He maintained that the Bible contains the Word of God, but not that it is the Word of God. It is an “invaluable laboratory manual which records all phases of man's life with God and God's dealing with men.” It is “a priceless treasury of spiritual truth, and from it have come the basic ideas and ideals on which the best of our democratic culture is founded.” It is “an amazing compendium of every kind of situation in human experience with the garnered wisdom of the ages to help in meeting them.” Many critics found these statements appallingly sub-Christian.

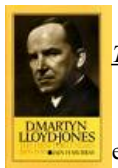


D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1994).

Gresham Machen is the perfect character to follow Harry Emerson Fosdick, for in Machen we find orthodoxy's greatest defender against the Modernist assault. D. G. Hart provides a brilliant analysis of Machen's life and impact in this interpretive biography. Most importantly, Hart places the life of Machen in the context of Machen's times and the crisis that conservative Protestantism faced in the early twentieth century — and in so many ways faces still.

Excerpt:

An extreme example of Machen's concern for language came in the sermon that sent Henry Van Dyke looking for another church. Here Machen parodied the liberal notion that each generation had to interpret the Bible or the creed according to its own time and place. Did not the modernist preacher, Machen wondered, hold to a static view of language when it came to such questions as whether six times nine equaled fifty-four or whether the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia? Why, then, was the theological affirmation of Christ's resurrection any different? According to Machen, the standard liberal response was “Of course we accept the proposition that ‘the third day he arose again from the dead’” but because each generation has a right to interpret the creed in its own way “we interpret that to mean ‘the third day He did not rise again from the dead.’” Machen's own rejoinder was to fear for the future of language. “If everything that I say can be “‘interpreted’ to mean its exact opposite, what is the use of saying anything at all?”



Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years, 1899-1939* and *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith, 1939-1981* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982, 1990).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for decades pastor at London's Westminster Chapel, was one of the greatest expositors of the twentieth century. Beyond this, he stood at the center of the century's great events and controversies. In Iain Murray's wonderful two-volume biography “The Doctor” and his ministry are presented and interpreted by one who worked alongside Dr. Lloyd-Jones and knew him well.

Excerpt:

Parallel with Lloyd-Jones' observance of the world around him, but ultimately more decisive, was the growing recognition which came to him of his own sinfulness. He began to recognise that sin was much more profound than such acts are commonly recognised as immoral: there is a wrongfulness in man's very desires. What the Apostle Paul calls ‘the lusts of the mind’ — pride, jealousy, envy, malice, anger, bitterness — are all part of the very same disease. Even in the mind, his highest faculty, man has become a fool. As this fact slowly dawned on Lloyd-Jones at about the age of twenty-three, his estimate of his own life was changed. The very debates which he had so enjoyed on religious subjects he discovered to be nothing but evidence of his own depravity. Preaching in later years on the ‘lusts of the mind,’ he

made one of his rare personal allusions when he declared: 'As I was preparing this sermon it filled me with a loathing and a hatred of myself. I look back and I think of the hours I have wasted in mere talk and argumentation. And it was all with one end only, simply to gain my point and to show how clever I was.'

More lists to follow. Read, learn, enjoy . . . and suggest yet other biographies worthy of the serious Christian's attention and reading.

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