

Twenty-six Vine Workers

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In their best-selling book, *The Trellis and the Vine*, Colin Marshall and Tony Payne argue persuasively for a “ministry mind-shift” in our churches—a mind-shift that focuses more of our time and energy on growing people as disciples of Christ through the prayerful ministry of the word (‘the vine’) than on growing and maintaining church structures and programs (‘the trellis’).

There is no doubt that many of our churches need this sort of mind-shift, but it is easier said than done—especially for pastors and leaders whose diaries are already too full, often with unavoidable ‘trellis’ work.

So we face a dilemma: we see the need to invest more time in growing people through prayerfully bringing the word of God to them, but we are ‘time poor’ and feel stretched to breaking point.

The authors address this issue in *The Trellis and the Vine*. Training co-workers to do vine work with you is a key recommendation, as is starting small and doing “a deep work in the lives of a few”.

The purpose of this article is to highlight another method of discipling people through God’s word—one that is both effective and time-efficient for shepherds. It involves recruiting twenty-six extra vine workers into your ministry. Here they are:

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

When we look back in history, we can see how powerfully God has used **the written word** in growing disciples of Jesus Christ. Indeed, he chose the written word of the Scriptures as his primary method of revealing himself.

Look, for example, at how rapidly the ideas of the

Reformation spread. How was it that the gospel teaching of Luther, Calvin and others was able to spread so rapidly and effectively across Europe, helping many to throw off the yoke of Roman Catholicism, and pointing them to the truth of justification by faith? The printing of books and tracts was a very significant factor. John Foxe even went so far as to say:

I suppose that either the pope must abolish printing, or he must seek a new world to reign over;

...

Now nothing doth debilitate and shake the high spire of his papacy so much as reading, preaching, knowledge, and judgement, that is to say, the fruit of printing;

...

For although through outward force and violent cruelty tongues dare not speak, yet the hearts of men daily (no doubt) be instructed through the benefit of printing.¹

Even today, there are some countries where the threat of outward force and violent cruelty still makes it easier to distribute literature than to speak personally. But for most of us in religiously free countries, perhaps we would rewrite Foxe’s last sentence above like this:

For although through busyness of life tongues have not enough time to speak, yet the hearts of men daily (no doubt) be instructed through the benefit of printing.

1. Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs: The acts and monuments of the Church*, Volume 1, p. 1032.



- can be read and thought about at a time that best suits them
- provides information not necessarily available through the people they have access to
- is often an immersive, mind-changing experience.

This final point is worth fleshing out. Reading a good book is a different experience from having an informal conversation with someone, or doing a Bible study, or listening to a sermon, or reading a blog. It is an immersive experience. In a good book, you enter into a sustained engagement with another mind in a way that is (almost always) impossible in daily conversation, or for that matter in church. An author can take the time to make an argument deeply and at length, challenging the errors and distorted thinking of our minds, and leading us to understand more of who God is and what he has done for us.

One author described some of the advantages of Christian literature in this way:

The printed page never flinches, it never shows cowardice; it is never tempted to compromise. The printed page never gets tired; it never gets disheartened. The printed page travels cheaply—you can be a missionary for the price of a stamp. It requires no buildings in which to operate. The printed page works while you sleep. It never loses its temper in discussion. And it works when you are gone from the scene. The printed page is a visitor that gets inside the home and stays there. It always catches a man in the right mood, it speaks to him only when he is reading it. It never answers back and it sticks to the point.²

But is the reading of Christian literature a thing of the past? What are the obstacles today? Can we still make use of Christian resources to disciple others? And, if so, why does it seem to be on the wane?

“People don’t read any more”

Steve Jobs famously said this in January 2008, while explaining why he didn’t think Amazon’s Kindle ebook reading device would be successful. Interestingly, just two years later, Jobs is selling his own electronic device (the iPad), with ebooks being one of his significant selling points. Let’s not be cynical; let’s give him the benefit of the doubt—perhaps he changed his view.

But it’s an interesting and important question to ask: do people read anymore?

The short and simple answer is “Yes, they do”.

There is no doubt that the Lord has used printed literature in powerful ways over many centuries to evangelize unbelievers and grow Christian believers in their faith. The power of Christian literature lies not in its form but in its content, just as the power of a sermon or a Bible study or a conversation after church lies not in the beauty of the words or the attractiveness of the personality, but in the way that it communicates God’s own word. God works through the words we speak to change people’s minds and hearts and lives (which is why we pray, as we speak, that his Spirit would do this work). And in the same way, God works through the written or printed word to change people’s minds and hearts and lives—as one Christian prayerfully gives another Christian a piece of Scripturally-faithful literature, and follows through afterwards with further conversation and prayer.

Let’s think for a moment about the advantages of the printed page as a tool for ministry.

For the discipler, Christian literature:

- is very time-efficient
- can provide expertise you don’t have and clarity you can’t easily match
- is relatively cheap because of the economies of scale in publishing
- is less personally confronting, because you can ask the author to challenge your disciple, and then talk to your disciple about the author’s ideas
- presents a second well-credentialed voice to reinforce what you are saying to your disciple.

For the disciple, Christian literature:

- provides clear and coherent arguments
- can be re-read and reflected on, over and over as necessary

2. ‘Every Christian a Publisher’, Ernest C Reisinger, 2001, <http://ccc138.org/article.asp?ID=196>

Despite the doomsaying, book sales continue to grow around the world.

However, the long answer is a little more complicated. The nature of what people read, and what publishers publish, has changed. People undoubtedly read more than they used to; it's just that a lot of their reading is now on computer screens (websites, blogs, newspapers, Facebook, etc.), and perhaps increasingly on hand-held screens (iPhones, Kindles, Blackberrys, iPads, etc.). They also still consume vast quantities of text in magazines, novels, biographies and cookbooks.


So a significant proportion of what people are reading is of a fundamentally different character to what they read in the past. It is often shorter, and it is generally less researched, less mulled-over, and less carefully written and re-written.³ (As someone has quipped, blogs are generally the publication of what we once used to call 'first drafts'.)

What people seem to do less these days is read non-fiction works that invite them to engage in a sustained journey of thought and argument over 100 pages or more. There are exceptions, of course—particularly with books that offer some significant personal benefit (often found on the 'inspirational' or pop-psychology shelves).

Therein lies a potential problem for using Christian literature in growing disciples. Many Christian books are non-fiction works that set out a sustained argument over 100 pages or more—the very type of book that seems to be on the decline. So how do we overcome this?

For publishers (and I write as a publisher), there are some obvious implications. (i) We need to publish resources that are very well written so that they are easy to read, not a chore. Far too many Christian books are a labour of love for the reader, and people are less and less willing to pay that cost when they see so many other ways of getting content delivered to them. (ii) Books also need to be well edited so that they are not bloated with content that should have ended up on the cutting room floor. (iii) We need to provide the content in a variety of forms so that people have access to the medium that suits them best (audio books, ebooks, interactive books, paperbacks, etc.). (iv) We need to keep prices as low as possible so that cost is not a barrier to using books and resources as part of a ministry—particularly evangelistic books.

3. Sherman Young argues that *real* books are a sustained engagement by the author with the reader in which something of the author's mind or intentions are conveyed. In this sense, many of the paper-and-cardboard artefacts we call 'books' are not really books. They have no argument, no life and very little mind associated with them at all. See *The Book is Dead. Long live the Book*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2007.



However, it's not just the publishers who need to lift their game. There is plenty that we can all do to encourage people to read good books for Christian growth.

1 Sell with enthusiasm. Far too many book recommendations, particularly from the pulpit, are half-hearted. Even if you're totally convinced that this book is going to be an enormous help to people's Christian growth, if you don't convey that conviction with some degree of passion, you're hardly likely to persuade anyone to take the step of reading it. As I said before, most people *will* read (or listen to) non-fiction if they see a significant benefit in it; we just need to convince people that the spiritual benefits they will receive are worth the investment.

2 Recommend books wisely and judiciously. If people say "I'm not much of a reader", start them off with something really well written, and shortish. Choose a topic that you know they will be interested in. Remember, you can always work towards the topic you know they aren't interested in but *need* to read at some stage for their Christian growth.

3 Exhort people to grow in their Christian understanding. We know from Scripture that God wants our minds to be renewed.⁴ Set this challenge before someone you are discipling: How are they going to grow in their understanding of the faith? Can they give up some TV in order to fill their minds with something more useful?

4 Talk about books. Make it a normal part of your conversation to chat about books, authors and publishers you respect and have been helped by. Let people see that reading is important to you, and let them catch the bug. Educate them as to why you read and who you read, and also how you choose which books to read.

5 Give books away. Bearing the cost yourself is one very powerful way of showing people how important you think reading a book is. There is no greater endorsement than for you to say, "I wanted you to read this book so much that I bought you a copy". That really is putting your money where your mouth is.

6 Commit to reading the book yourself, so that you can talk with people about the content, and, importantly, hold each other accountable for actually persevering through to the end of the book. There are too many Christian books sitting on bookshelves with a bookmark halfway through.

4. Matt 22:37; Luke 24:45; Rom 8:5-6, 12:2; 1 Cor 1:10, 14:19; Eph 4:23; Col 3:2; 1 Pet 1:13.



But which book?

Another obstacle—for both the discipler and the disciple—is the terrible tyranny of choice. Every year, thousands of new Christian books and resources are published. How do you choose?

And you certainly *do* need to choose. Many (so-called) Christian books are of such little value that you can only feel deeply sorry for the trees that gave up their lives to provide the paper. Sometimes it is obvious that this is the case, even from the title. But sometimes they sound like good books, and it is only upon reading them that we discover how unbiblical or poorly written they are.

Here are some tips.

1. Use the internet to learn more about books before you buy them. There are good evangelical book review sites (such as discerningreader.com), and many good evangelical bloggers also regularly recommend books (e.g. *Between Two Worlds*⁵). Check out other books by the same author, and see what people have said about them. If their other books were good, there's a decent chance this one will be too.
2. Pay more attention to the books of authors and publishers who you know have a deep-seated commitment to biblical truth and to good-quality editing. Avoid publishers who seem to publish anything that they think will sell, or who like to be seen as a bit 'edgy'.
3. Get recommendations from other Christian friends and ministry colleagues whose opinions you trust.

4. Work out a list of core topics, and then create a short-list of books you recommend on each topic. Occasionally you might need to research and find a book on another topic, but for general ministry purposes, your list will define which books to keep on hand for giving or lending to people (or to ensure your church bookstall has in stock). To get you started, we've developed a basic list on key topics by trusted biblically-faithful authors (see matthiasmedia.com.au/vineworkersbooklist).
5. If possible, try not to recommend any core book without having it available there and then. Getting people to read is challenge enough; avoid making them also jump through the hoops of having to find it, order it, and wait a week or two for it to arrive. You can also save money this way by buying in bulk or when books are on special.
6. Avoid recommending books by authors who have gone off the rails (doctrinally or morally). Even though the particular book you have in mind might be excellent, people will often assume that it is worth reading any book by an author you recommend.

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The goal of this article has been to encourage you to make use of Christian books and resources in the task of growing disciples—of doing 'vine work'.

This may seem somewhat self-serving for a Christian publisher. But the truth is that we do believe in the great power of Christian books and resources, under God, to change lives in amazing ways. By God's grace, books provide that sort of immersive and powerfully transforming effect on minds and hearts. We've seen this happen time and again in over twenty years of publishing resources for ministry.

We're convinced of it. It's why we do what we do. It's why we want to be co-workers with you in vine work. It's why we produce the books and resources that we do, and why we encourage you to use them in ministry, by giving discounts when you buy as few as 2, 5 or 10 copies.

Go to our website (matthiasmedia.com) to browse a wide range of books and resources that facilitate vine work. You could also try using our Online Resource Finder (onlineresourcefinder.com). This little application asks you a series of diagnostic questions to help you find a suitable resource to meet your need.

Better still, give us a call. We'd love to have a chat, and to help you find the resources you need to grow other disciples. 🍷

5. <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/>