

Reading Difficult Books: A Personal Reminiscence

by Rev. Steven Dilday

Shortly after my conversion to Christ, I became a regular listener to the radio broadcast of Dr. R.C. Sproul. Through Dr. Sproul I was exposed to Reformed theology for the first time, and, from the first, I was captivated. I was quite interested, of course, when he mentioned that he thought that Jonathan Edwards' *Freedom of the Will* was the most important, most theologically formative, book that he had ever read. I ordered it immediately from Soli Deo Gloria and waited anxiously for its arrival. When the book arrived, I could not get the wrapping off fast enough. I started into it immediately, but was more than a little surprised by what I found. I discovered that I was not able to read it. Well, I was able to read and pronounce all the words, but I had never before seen a single sentence continue for a page and a half. By the time I reached the end of a sentence, I could not remember how it started. Moreover, he spent the first quarter of the book simply discussing the definition of the terms that he would be using (not the most exciting reading), definitions which were formulated through a sophisticated interaction with Puritan theology and early eighteenth century European philosophy (of which I knew nothing). Difficulties crowded in on every side, but my determination was roused. I had Dr. Sproul's testimony that the reading of this volume would be profitable, so I prepared myself for the labor. It was hard work; sometimes I would spend a whole afternoon just trying to understand a single page. If memory serves, it took me the better part of a year to work through the whole. And what profit had I for my effort? Much in every way. First, I really learned to read; I have not since had that difficulty in reading. Second, I developed a love for the literature of the Puritans which has consumed most of my waking hours since that time. Third, the book did more to shape my general theological method than anything else that I have read. Fourth, I never forgot the contents of the book, Edwards' striking harmonization of divine sovereignty and human freedom. In the final evaluation, the hours spent in the reading of that difficult book were among the most well-spent of my entire life.

Currently, I am laboring to translate Matthew Poole's *Synopsis Criticorum* (*Synopsis of Interpreters*). These are difficult books, but I have undertaken the labor because I am firmly convinced that Christian people will profit immeasurably, if they will but do the hard work of reading them. In this day and age, it seems that few Christians want to struggle with the difficult books, preferring the lighter devotional books. Although I have nothing against devotional books, to leave off the reading of difficult books is, in my estimation, a great mistake. Why? Because some truths are difficult and can only be mastered through difficulty. Soren Kierkegaard once observed that, if a man can have a thing in an easier way, then he should take it in an easier way. Indeed, it is a great convenience to have water from the faucet rather than having to pump it from the well. But some things cannot be had in an easy way, and some truths concerning God, God's Christ, and God's Scripture will not be mastered easily. Although such truths are attained in difficulty and discomfort, they are frequently among the most edifying and nourishing. This has been my experience, but not just mine. C.S. Lewis, in his preface to Athanasius' *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, said, "For my own part, I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I

rather suspect that the same experience may await others. I believe that many who find that ‘nothing happens’ when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.”

So, if you desire to know the Scripture better, I commend Poole’s *Synopsis* to you. They are not easy books, but, should you give the requisite effort, I believe that you will find yourself well-recompensed for your labor.