

Being a Christian Writer

by E.A. Johnston

As a Christian writer, your motivation and purpose should be to bring glory to God, and He will make a way for you to achieve your writing goals.

Duration: 17:25

Scripture: Proverbs 16:3, Ecclesiastes 9:10, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:23, 2 Timothy 2:15, James 1:5, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Writing"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares his personal experience as a Christian writer and offers advice to aspiring writers in the Christian community. He emphasizes the importance of staying positive and reading quality books to learn from other authors. The speaker also encourages writers to strive for precision in their writing, even spending hours on a single sentence if necessary. He shares his own journey of rejection and reminds writers that perseverance is key in this challenging profession. Overall, the message aims to inspire and encourage Christian writers to continue their work and pursue their calling.

Transcript

My message today, friends, is on being a Christian writer. As a Christian author, I am often asked by aspiring writers for advice. I bring this message today with the hope that it encourages some Christian writers to continue their work in a challenging and difficult profession.

Some people feel they are born to write, and I was one of those people. I have been writing since I was 8 years old. I taught myself how to type on a manual typewriter when I was 10 and began writing short stories back then.

I continued to write and study classical literature all throughout my youth and young adult years. I read everything by Flaubert and Morpissant, Hemingway and Faulkner, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. I was trained in the classics and I had big plans to become a famous author when I was a youth.

I finally wrote what I felt was my magnum opus, a multi-layered novel about good and evil, and it caught the attention of some literary houses in New York about 30 years ago, but I received rejection letters which all said, although they felt it was an important work, it was not, in their opinion, a viable commodity. As I thought of that, I did not want to be a viable commodity. What I was doing was creating art, so I quit writing for nearly the next 20 years.

I walked away from writing altogether. Then in 2001, I remember driving home one day and I was at a stoplight and with tears in my eyes, I began to pray. I said, Lord, why did you give me a talent for writing if you're not going to use it? It's not fair.

Well, God saw my tears that day. He had no problem with me writing. He just wanted me all for himself.

He did not want me to become a popular secular writer, so he had shut all doors to protect me from that kind of life. He had given me my writing abilities to write for him and bring him glory. Well, exactly two weeks from that prayer in my car, I was at my church's bookstore asking the lady behind the counter if she could order me a copy of the biography on the life of J. Sidlow Baxter, the famous British preacher and writer.

She looked at me sadly and replied, there isn't a biography on Dr. Baxter. Perhaps one day someone will write it. I went home that afternoon and shared that with my wife.

I said, can you believe there's not a biography on Sidlow Baxter? My wife simply answered, you used to write, why don't you write it? I just stood there with my mouth open, lost in thought. And in a few weeks, I was in lovely Santa Barbara, California, sitting in the home of J. Sidlow Baxter, interviewing his widow, Iza, who would become my dear friend. That was the beginning of my Christian pen ministry.

I finished Sidlow Baxter's biography and it took a whole year to find a publisher. Then I had to wait another year for it to be published. Frustration goes hand in hand with being a writer.

The book was eventually published by Baker Books in 2005. Since that time, I have authored 16 books of Christian literature, which have all been published. If you are an aspiring Christian writer and you desire to know how to get published and market your book, I hope this message will be helpful to you.

We will cover such topics as, do you need an agent? Should you self-publish or go with an established publisher? And other pertinent topics. Well, let me begin by asking you a question. Why do you want to write? What is your motive? Do you desire fame and recognition like I did as a youth? Do you want to make a lot of money writing books and get rich? Do you want to make a name for yourself? What is your motivating reason for writing? Your answer will reveal much to you about yourself.

When I was a secular writer, I was friends with Shelby Foote, the noted Civil War historian and author, but we would often talk on the phone about writing and writers. We both lived in Memphis and were Southerners, and perhaps that's why he was so encouraging to me. I still have his handwritten letters in his beautiful handwriting.

I was discouraged as a writer one day and picked up the phone and asked for his sage advice. After we talked on the phone for a while, Shelby Foote responded to me in a handwritten letter with the following advice. Listen to what he wrote me.

The weeding out starts at the outset and it never really stops. You have chosen, or been chosen by, a very tough profession, one of whose conditions is that you must function utterly on your own, keep working, or else don't. But I can tell you now that's all that matters.

Everything else is for extra, including money and so-called fame. I thought that was sound advice, so I ask you friend, you who are interested in the writing profession, as a Christian writer, are you after money and so-called fame? If you are, that is a poor reason to become a writer. Both are fleeting and both are empty

vapors in regard to the light of eternity.

But if you can say you want to be a Christian writer for the reason of bringing glory to God, then that would be a better answer. I would say to you that if your motivation to write is to bring glory to God, then you are on the right track and I would encourage you on in your work. God will honor those who honor him.

Now let's get down to cases. Should you self-publish? Do you need an agent? My friend, the late Bill McDonald authored 80 books. His book sold in the millions.

Bill wrote the best single-selling Bible commentary, Believer's Bible Commentary, published by Nelson, and his book on discipleship, True Discipleship, is a classic. It sold over a million copies. That's pretty good, isn't it? He never made a dime from them.

He gave all his money to missions. He gave me good advice about writing, and we would talk about writing often. When I was working on my own book on discipleship, I asked Bill McDonald for advice since his book, True Discipleship, had done so well.

His advice to me was this. He said two things. He said, don't state the obvious and take the gloves off.

That was Bill. Well, in regard to self-publishing, Bill told me this. He said, any book worth writing is worth being published by a respected publisher.

Don't self-publish. Bill felt that you were putting yourself into a category of writers who could not get published anywhere else if you self-published. I tend to agree with him.

I have never self-published. God has always opened up doors to getting my books with the right publisher. The point I'm making by mentioning Shelby Foote and Bill McDonald, established writers are willing to give advice to those aspiring writers who need it.

Someone helped them when they were starting out. It was William Faulkner who helped and befriended Shelby Foote. People ask me, do you need an agent? I was always told that no publisher will ever read any manuscript sent to them unless it is brokered by an agent.

I have not found this to be true. I've never had an agent. I've been able to get indoors with the help of friends and on my own.

I never really needed one. Now I will say this, who you know is important. If you have a friend who has an in with a publisher, that is often the best route to go, but you must have the goods when you get in the door.

My first published Christian book was my biography on J. Sidlow Baxter. I was able to get the manuscript read by several major Christian publishers on my own, but a factual door was open for me through my friendship with Adrian Rogers. It helped that Dr. Rogers wrote the foreword to my book and he had many books out on his own already.

He contacted some of his editor friends for me and through this I was given access to some key editors which I would not have had that immediate access had it not been for him. Eventually, Baker Books published my work on J. Sidlow Baxter through my own doors opening there with the Lord's help, but you know it's who you know sometimes to get into the publishing world. So I would say avoid self-publishing if you can.

If you write a quality book that brings glory to God, eventually someone will publish it. E-books seem to be catching on. My wife has a Kindle, but I am old-fashioned.

I prefer to hold a book in my hand when I read it. I like the feel of a good book. In Christian writing, two biggest selling areas are fiction and self-help books.

If you want to sell a lot of books, those are the two most popular categories it seems today. But let me ask you friend, where do your talents lie? As a writer, you must find your niche. What is the area that best suits your gifts and abilities? I have written on a wide range of subjects.

I've written a Bible survey, a book on discipleship, a book on repentance, three books on the subject of revival, one on prayer, and a wide array of other topics. But my niche is Christian biography. My strength lies more in biography, and writing Christian biography is where I've devoted my life's work as a writer.

I will say this, writing a biography is the hardest writing out there. The research involved is expensive, time-consuming, challenging, and just plain hard. When I wrote my two-volume definitive biography on the life of George Whitefield, I had to travel all over America and Great Britain.

I had to conduct research in London, Bristol, Edinburgh, Glasgow, and locales all over the place where Whitefield had preached and labored. It was extremely expensive to write that biography, just the travel costs alone were high. I wrote that book without any grants or back-and-from foundations.

I had no personal secretary nor any research aides. I wrote it all by myself, all 1,200 pages. It was hard labor, but the rewards of seeing it published have been worth it.

You must discover your area of expertise as a Christian writer. Where are your strengths? What are your weaknesses? May I make a suggestion to you which may be helpful? Write something, and let a friend read it, and get their feedback. Let your spouse read it, and get their feedback.

You may find their opinions helpful. Did they find what you wrote insightful? Did they find it interesting? Or was it a hard book to read? You will get instant feedback by those who read your book. My latest biography on the fiery Baptist evangelist Ralph Barnard was recently published.

My publisher informed me that the first feedback he received on the book was from a veteran preacher who read the book and told him that he could not put the book down. That's the kind of positive feedback you'll want to hear. Is the book a page-turner? Is it interesting? When I wrote my book on Sidlo Baxter, I wrote it to be a book you could take on vacation and read for enjoyment and inspiration.

I have received letters from people from several countries telling me how much they enjoyed reading that book. These are some things you must ponder as a writer before you write. Who is your audience? What is your subject? What do you have to say? Can you fill a void in Christian literature with what you write? Is there a topic no one else has tackled in print before? Is there a book longing to be written that no one has written yet? Sure there is, and you may be the very person to write that book, friend.

I want to encourage you in your writing endeavors to stay positive, read other quality books, and learn from them. How does that author use words to convey his subject material? How does that writer construct a sentence to give it the most precision? You want to write with precision. Some Christian writers spend all morning on just one sentence just to get it precise and have as much clarity as possible.

The craft of writing differs from individual to individual. Hemingway always wrote in the morning and fished and hunted in the afternoons. He would never write when he was tired.

Hemingway said he could tell when another writer wrote fatigued. Hemingway related that his good friend F. Scott Fitzgerald would write when he was often worn out, and Hemingway could always detect the passages in Fitzgerald's books where he wrote fatigued. The writing was not crisp and forceful.

You will have to learn what time of day best suits your writing genius. How bad do you want to be a writer will say much about you. Writing is a very lonely profession.

You will spend much time in isolation away from family and friends, and this is a high price to pay as a writer. There is often a sacrifice attending it. It is also a very discouraging profession.

Rejection letters will pile high on your desk, but don't give up. You will receive some reviews which may hurt your feelings, and that can be discouraging. I have received both good reviews on my books and not-so-good reviews, and it does sting a little, but you must have a thick skin as a writer.

My friend, the late John Phillips, the Bible commentator, once told me he received a bad review on his commentary on Genesis. It made him so mad he wrote a scorching letter to the reviewer and was just about to mail it when his wife talked him out of it. My advice to you, friend, is to do the same.

Don't get confrontational with reviewers. Your book will stand the test of time on its own. It matters little what man thinks about it anyway.

As long as God is pleased with it and it brings him glory, isn't that right? Well, I hope this message on writing Christian literature has been helpful to you. Remember this, friend. If God has called you to write for Him, He will make a way for you.

He will open doors for you. He will undergird your writing and bless your endeavors as you bring glory to Him in what you write for Him. May God's richest blessings be upon you and your writing endeavors.

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