

Books Which Will Never Die

by J.C. Philpot

A book's enduring life is determined by its ability to appeal to human nature and contain the seeds of self-renewing life.

Scripture: Psalm 119:89, Proverbs 30:5, Isaiah 26:14, Isaiah 40:8, Matthew 24:35, John 1:1, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Peter 1:24, Revelation 22:18

Topics: "Eternal Scripture", "Spiritual Renewal"

Description

J.C. Philpot discusses the enduring impact of certain books that contain the seeds of self-renewing life, contrasting them with the vast majority that fade into obscurity. He highlights the importance of books that appeal to the universal aspects of human nature, whether secular or spiritual, as they transcend time and remain imperishable. Philpot emphasizes the significance of the Bible, which stands the test of time against all attacks and remains as the eternal word of God, unlike the works of infidel writers that are destined for oblivion.

Transcript

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There are books which will never die; and the reason is because they contain in themselves, we will not say the elements of immortality, for nothing is immortal below the skies, but what we may term the seeds of an ever self-renewing life. In the literary as in the vegetable world, there is a wonderful and almost infinite quantity and diversity of growth. Thus there are annuals and perennials, shrubs and trees, books, though few in number, which have the knotty strength of the oak--and books, but much fewer still, which have the enduring life of the cedar.

There are also plants fair to the eye, but, like the poisonous nightshade, bearing deadly fruit to the taste; and there is a fungus growth, the product of a corrupt press, spreading itself far and wide to taint the blood of the rising generation with principles of infidelity and sin.

There never, perhaps, was an age in which there was so large an amount or so great a variety of books on every subject which can exercise or instruct or delight the human mind; and as with men, so with books, every year adds its thousands to the already existing population. Yet out of this countless progeny of

books--how few survive even their birth, dropping, as if stillborn, from the press--how few attain to youth or manhood--how more rarely still do any reach a vigorous old age, or, as if they had drunk at the fount of life, renew their youth like the eagle. One in a thousand may outlive a century, but all the rest, at different stages of their life, sink into the tomb of perpetual night.

But amid this general decay, this mortality and death among the books, almost as certain and as sweeping as mortality and death among men, a few works never die, and for the reason which we have already given--that they contain in themselves the seeds of an ever self-renewing life. It does not lie within our province to notice those productions of human genius, either in dead or living tongues, which are handed down from age to age to instruct or delight generation after generation; but the same principle which we have laid down will apply to all books, whether worldly or religious, which have won to themselves an enduring inheritance.

There is in them all that appeal to the common principles of our nature, that meeting of the needs, the sorrows, the desires, the aspirations, the hopes, the fears, the feelings and passions of the human bosom, which, vivified by the power of genius in works worldly and secular--or lighted by fire from heaven in books spiritual and religious--renders them independent of all the mutations of thought and time, and makes them virtually imperishable. This is what we mean when we speak of them as containing in themselves a self-renewing life.

But though the death among the books would, if duly recorded, be the largest and most wearisome of all obituaries, yet, after all, strange though it may appear to say so, their mortality is more apparent than real, and a greater benefit than an injury to general society. Books, like men, naturally and necessarily grow old; and how would the busy, laboring, active, and thriving commercial world, fare if all its manifold and intricate business were carried on by old men instead of the middle aged and young?

So with books. New books are needed, as young men are needed, to carry on the business of life; and as the father survives in the son, who is better adapted for fresh modes of business, so the old book survives in the new work which is better suited to the habits and feelings of modern thought. Old geographies, old histories, old cyclopaedias, like old almanacs and old directories, become necessarily obsolete and practically worthless; and so similarly thousands of books die a natural death, and perish of sheer decay.

And who would wish them to live, or stretch forth his hand to save them from a deserved death? In this world, corrupt as it is, few things really die but what ought to die. Who would wish to snatch from death and oblivion, what is alike corrupt and corrupting? Multitudes of so-called religious books are no more worthy of preservation than the tales and novels which fill the shelves of a railway bookstall; and therefore justly perish as being as much founded on false principles in religion as novels are on false principles of human conduct and life.

Now contrast with these abortive productions of the modern religious press--our old, our grand, our noble, our blessed Bible. How many works have been written against it in every age to overthrow its claims to inspiration as the word of the living God; and how every argument which learning could suggest, or research discover, or malice aim, or ingenuity invent, or wit point, has been hurled against the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. But where are they all? Dead, buried, and forgotten. We may apply to them the words of the prophet--"They are dead, they shall not live; they are deceased, they shall not rise; therefore have you visited and destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish." (Isa. 26:14.) Who now reads the works, or even knows the names of Hobbes, Collins, or Tindal, men who in their day were

like Strauss, Renan, and Colenso in ours, deadly opponents of the inspiration of Scripture--Goliaths of Gath--in their own and their admirers' opinion?

But God has made their memory to perish, while the grand old Bible stands, like him of whom it testifies, the word of God, which lives and abides forever. Such, also, will be the fate of those infidel books and their infidel writers that are making their little stir in our day, and with their great swelling words do but foam out their own shame. God will do unto them as unto the Midianites; as to Sisera, as to Jabin, at the brook of Kishon, who perished at Endor; they became as dung for the earth.

But, as distinct from such books as these and their native kindred, which in a more subtle form spread abroad the same principles, and therefore perish, justly perish as under the blight of an eternal frown, we seem to have some reason to mourn over the death and dissolution of many works of a past age which seemed worthy to live. How many books, for instance, of the old Puritan writers are now dead and forgotten; and yet, as we read the writings, so edifying and so instructive, of Owen, Sibbes, Goodwin, etc., we almost wonder that the church of Christ could ever let them die.

But either from lack of spirituality in the church itself, or from their style not being suited to the present age, or their not being ready at hand, how rarely are these masterpieces of sanctified intellect read either by our ministers, or our people. Thus there seems to be a term of life even to the best of books. Slowly but surely they sink into the grave, and if some struggle on a little longer than their brethren, it is only to be borne in the end to one common cemetery.

Whence, then, comes it to pass that any resist the common doom? It will be found that if any survive the general dissolution--and we know there are those which have outlived centuries--it is only those which, as we have said before, contain in themselves the elements of a self-renewing, and, therefore, indestructible life.

No author has ever survived his own day who has not been gifted with a vivid, original, and life-like style--for what is wearisome to read, is soon not read at all.

Such an author is never dull, never prosy, never commonplace, never confused, never unintelligible. The buoyancy of his style is remarkable, and bears his books up so that they never become wearisome. Seasoned with heavenly salt, and enlivened with the most sprightly and original sallies of wit, they possess a peculiar freshness, so that they become neither dry nor moldy.

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