

The Use of Tracts

By R. A. Torrey



R. A. Torrey (1856-1928) was a Congregational evangelist, teacher, author, born in Hoboken, New Jersey. He was educated in Yale University and Divinity School. After a period of skepticism he trusted in Jesus Christ as Saviour. Soon after he pastored in Ohio and then in Minnesota. In 1889 Dwight L. Moody called Torrey to Chicago to become the superintendent of the school which became known as the Moody Bible Institute. He also served as pastor of the Chicago Avenue Church, now the Moody Memorial Church, for twelve years. Between 1902-1906 Torrey and Charles Alexander conducted a very fruitful evangelistic outreach in Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, India, China, Japan, Britain, Germany, Canada, and the USA. From 1912-1924 Torrey was dean of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles during which he pastored the Church of the Open Door. His remaining years involved holding Bible conferences, teaching at the Moody Bible Institute, and other endeavours. (Adapted from "The Wycliffe Biographical Dictionary of the Church, Elgin S. Moyer, Moody Press, 1982)

The following is from Torrey's larger work, "Methods of Christian Work " (Chapter 5, pages 213-221):
Comparatively few Christians realize the importance of tract work. I had been a Christian a good many years, and a minister of the Gospel several years, before it ever entered my head that tracts were of much value in Christian work. I had somehow grown up with the notion that tracts were all rubbish, and therefore I did not take the trouble to read them, and far less did I take the trouble to circulate them, but I found out that I was entirely wrong. Tract work has some great advantages over other forms of Christian work.

I. Importance and advantages.

1. Any person can do it. We cannot all preach; we cannot all conduct meetings; but we can all select useful tracts and then hand them out to others. Of course some of us can do it better than others. Even a blind man or a dumb man can do tract work. It is a line of work in which every man, woman and child can engage.
2. A tract always sticks to the point. I wish every worker did that, but how often we get to talking to some one and he is smart enough to get us off on to a side track.
3. A tract never loses its temper. Perhaps you sometimes do. I have known Christian workers, even workers of experience, who would sometimes get all stirred up, but you cannot stir up a tract It always remains as calm as a June morning.
4. Oftentimes people who are too proud to be talked with, will read a tract when no one is looking. There is many a man who would repulse you if you tried to speak to him about his soul, who will read a tract if you leave it on his table, or in some other place where he comes upon it accidentally, and that tract may be used for his salvation.
5. A tract stays by one. You talk to a man and then he goes away, but the tract stays with him. Some years ago a man came into a mission in New York. One of the workers tried to talk with him, but he would not listen. As he was leaving, a card tract was placed in his hands which read, "If I should die to-night I would go to _____ Please fill out and sign." He put it in his pocket, went to his steamer, for he was a sailor, and slipped it into the edge of his bunk. The steamer started for Liverpool. On his voyage he met with an accident, and was laid aside in his bunk. That card stared him in the face, day and night. Finally he said, "If I should die tonight I would go to hell, but I will not go there, I will go to heaven, I will take Christ right here and now." He went to Liverpool, returned to New York, went to the mission, told his story,

and had the card, which was still in his pocket, filled out and signed with his name. The conversation he had had in the mission left him, but the card stayed by him.

6. Tracts lead many to accept Christ. The author of one tract ("What is it to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ?") received before his death upwards of sixteen hundred letters from people who had been led to Christ by reading it.

II. Purposes for which to use a tract.

1. For the conversion of the unsaved. A tract will often succeed in winning a man to Christ where a sermon or a personal conversation has failed. There are a great many people who, if you try to talk with them, will put you off; but if you put a tract in their hands and ask God to bless it, after they go away and are alone they will read the tract and God will carry it home to their hearts by the power of the Holy Ghost. One of our students wrote me in great joy of how he had at last succeeded in winning a whole family for Christ. He had been working for that family for a long time but could not touch them. One day he left a tract with them, and God used that tract for the conversion of four or five members of the family. Another student held a cottage meeting at a home, and by mistake left his Bible there. There was a tract in the Bible. When he had gone, the woman of the house saw the Bible, picked it up, opened it, saw the tract and read it. The Spirit of God carried it home to her heart, and when he went back after the Bible she told him she wanted to find the Lord Jesus Christ. The tract had done what he could not do in personal work. I once received a letter from a man saying, "There is a man in this place whom I tried for a long time to reach but could not. One day I handed him a tract, and I think it was to the salvation of his whole family."

2. To lead Christians into a deeper and more earnest Christian life. It is a great mistake to limit the use of tracts to winning the unsaved to Christ. A little tract on the Second Coming of Christ, once sent me in a letter, made a change in my whole life. I do not think the tract was altogether correct doctrinally, but it had in it an important truth, and it did for me just the work that needed to be done.

There is a special class of people with whom this form of ministry is particularly helpful, those who live where they do not enjoy spiritual advantages. You may know some one who is leading a very unsatisfactory life, and you long to have that person know what the Christian life really means. His pastor may not be a spiritual man, he may not know the deep things of God. It is the simplest thing in the world to slip into a letter a tract that will lead him into an entirely new Christian life.

3. To correct error. This is a very necessary form of work in the day in which we live. The air is full of error. In our personal work we have not always time to lead a man out of his error, but oftentimes we can give him a tract that can do the work better than we can. If you tried to lead him out of his error by personal work, you might get into a discussion, but the tract cannot. The one in error cannot talk back to the tract. For example, take people that are in error on the question of seventh day observance. It might take some time to lead such a one out of the darkness into the light, but a tract on that subject can be secured that has been used of God to lead many out of the bondage of legalism into the glorious liberty of the Gospel of Christ.

4. To set Christians to work. Our churches are full of members who are doing nothing. A well-chosen tract may set such to work. I know of a young man who was working in a factory in Massachusetts. He was a plain, uneducated sort of fellow, but a little tract on personal work was placed in his hands. He read it and re-read it, and said, "I am not doing what I should for Christ." He went to work among his companions in the factory, inviting them to the church, and to hear his pastor preach. Not satisfied with this, he went to doing personal work. This was not sufficient, so he went to work holding meetings himself. Finally he brought a convention to his city. Just that one plain factory man was the means of getting a great convention and blessing to that place, and all from reading that little tract. He was also instrumental in organizing a society which was greatly blessed of God. It would be possible to fill this country with literature on Christian work that would stir up the dead and sleeping professors of religion throughout the land, and send them out to work for the Lord Jesus Christ

III. Who should use tracts.

1. Ministers of the Gospel should use them. Many ministers do make constant use of them in their pastoral work, leaving well chosen tracts where they make their pastoral calls, handing out tracts along the line of the sermons that they preach. It is said of Rev. Edward Judson of New York, that he seldom makes a call without having in his pocket a selection of tracts adapted to almost every member of the

family, and especially to the children. "At the close of the Sunday evening preaching service, he has often put some good brother in the chair, and while the meeting proceeds he goes down into the audience and gives to each person a choice leaflet, at the same time taking the opportunity to say a timely word. In this way he comes into personal touch with the whole audience, gives each stranger a cordial welcome, and leaves in his hand some message from God. At least once a year he selects some one tract that has in it the very core of the Gospel. On this he prints the notices of the services, and selecting his church as a center, he has this tract put in the hands of every person living within half a mile in each direction, regardless of creed or condition. He sometimes uses 10,000 tracts at one distribution, and finds it very fruitful in results."

2. Sunday School teachers. Every Sunday School teacher should be on the lookout for tracts to give to his scholars. In this way he can do much to supplement his hour's work on the Lord's Day.
3. Traveling men. Traveling men have a rare opportunity for doing tract work. They are constantly coming in contact with different men, and finding out their needs. A Christian "drummer" with a well-assorted selection of tracts can accomplish immeasurable good.
4. Business men. Business men can use tracts to good advantage with the very men with whom they have business engagements. They can also do excellent work with their own employees. Many a business man slips well chosen tracts into many of the letters which he writes, and thus accomplishes an effective ministry for his Master.
5. School teachers. It is very difficult for school teachers in some cities and towns to talk very much with their pupils in school. Oftentimes the rules of the school board prevent it entirely, but a wise teacher can learn all about her scholars and their home surroundings, and can give them tracts just adapted to their needs.
6. Housekeepers. Every Christian housekeeper should have a collection of well assorted tracts. She can hand these out to the servant girls, the grocery men, the market men, the butcher, to the tramps that come to the door. They can be left upon the table in the parlor and in bedrooms. Only eternity will disclose the good that is accomplished in these ways.

IV. How to use tracts.

1. To begin a conversation. One of the difficulties in Christian work is to begin. You see a person with whom you wish to talk about the Lord Jesus Christ. The great difficulty is in starting. It is easy enough to talk after you have started, but how are you going to start a conversation naturally and easily? One of the simplest and easiest ways is by slipping a tract into the person's hand. After the tract has been read, a conversation naturally follows. I was once riding in a crowded car. I asked God for an opportunity to lead some one to Christ. I was watching for the opportunity for which I had asked, when two young ladies entered. I thought I knew one of them as the daughter of a minister. She went through the car looking for a seat, and then came back. As she came back and sat down in the seat in front of me, she bowed, and of course I knew I was right as to who she was. I took out a little bundle of tracts, and selecting one that seemed best adapted to her case, I handed it to her, having first asked God to bless it. She at once began to read and I began to pray. When she had read the tract, I asked her what she thought about it. She almost burst into tears right there in the car, and in a very few moments that minister's daughter was rejoicing in the Lord Jesus Christ as her personal Saviour. As she afterwards passed out of the car, she said, "I want to thank you for what you have done for me in leading me to Christ."
2. Use a tract to close a conversation. As a rule when you have finished talking with some one, you should not leave him without something definite to take home to read. If the person has accepted Christ, put some tract in his hands that will show him how to succeed in the Christian life. If the person has not accepted Christ, some other tract that is especially adapted to his need should be left with him.
3. Use tracts where a conversation is impossible. For example, one night at the close of a tent meeting in Chicago, as I went down one of the aisles a man beckoned to me, and intimated that his wife was interested. She was in tears, and I tried to talk with her, but she stammered out in a broken way, "We don't talk English." She had not understood a word of the sermon, I suppose, but God had carried something home to her heart. They were Norwegians, and I could not find a Norwegian in the whole tent to act as interpreter, but I could put a Norwegian tract in her hand, and that could do the work. Time and time again I have met with men deeply interested about their soul's salvation, but with whom I could not deal because I did not talk the language that they understood.

One day as I came from dinner, I found a Swede waiting for me, and he said he had a man outside with whom he wished me to talk. I went outside and found an uncouth looking specimen, a Norwegian. The Swede had found him drunk in an alley and dragged him down to the Institute to talk with me. He was still full of whisky, and spit tobacco juice over me as I tried to talk with him. I found he could not talk English, and I talked English to the Swede, and the Swede talked Swedish to the Norwegian, and the Norwegian got a little bit of it. I made it as clear as I could to our Swede interpreter, and he in his turn made it as clear as he could to the Norwegian. Then I put a Norwegian tract in his hands, and that could talk to him so that he understood perfectly.

Oftentimes a conversation is impossible because of the place where you meet people. For example, you may be on the street cars and wish to speak to a man, but in many instances it would not be wise if it were possible, but you can take the man's measure and then give him a tract that will fit him. You may be able to say just a few words to him and then put the tract in his hands and ask God to bless it.

4. Use tracts to send to people at a distance. It does not cost a tract much to travel. You can send them to the ends of the earth for a few cents. Especially use them to send to people who live in out of the way places where there is no preaching. There are thousands of people living in different sections of this country where they do not hear preaching from one year's end to another. It would be impossible to send an evangelical preacher to them, but you can send a tract and it will do the preaching for you.

V. Suggestions as to the use of tracts.

1. Always read the tracts yourself before giving them to others. This is very necessary. Bad tracts abound to-day, tracts that contain absolutely pernicious doctrine. They are being circulated free by the million, and one needs to be on his guard, lest he be doing harm rather than good in distributing tracts. Of course we cannot read all the tracts in foreign languages, but we can have them interpreted to us, and it is wise to do so. Besides positively bad tracts, there are many tracts that are worthless.

2. Suit your tract to the person to whom you give it. What is good for one person may not be good for another.

3. Carry a selection of tracts with you. I do not say a collection, but a selection. Tracts are countless in number, and a large share of them are worthless. Select the best, and arrange them for the different classes of people with whom you come in contact.

4. Seek the guidance of God. This is of the very highest importance. If there is any place where we need wisdom from above, it is in the selection of tracts, and in their distribution after their selection.

5. Seek God's blessing upon the tract after you have given it out. Do not merely give out the tract and there let the matter rest, but whenever you give out a tract ask God to bless it.

6. Oftentimes give a man a tract with words and sentences underscored. Men are curious, and they will take particular notice of the underscoring. It is oftentimes a good thing to have a tract put up in your office. Men who come in will read it. I know a man who had a few words put upon his paper weight. A great many who came into his office saw it, and it made a deep impression upon them.

7. Never be ashamed of distributing tracts. Many people hand out tracts to others as if they were ashamed of what they were doing. People are not likely to read tracts if you hand them to them as if you were ashamed to do it; but if you act as though you were conferring a favor upon them, and giving them something worth reading, they will read your tract. It is often well to say to a person, "Here is a little leaflet out of which I have gotten a good deal of good. I would like to have you read it."