

A Commitment to Serious Theology

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If you've been in ministry for any length of time, you are well aware that there are a host of approaches to doing pastoral work. Diverse philosophies are urged on us, not simply in books marketed to pastors, but more pressingly by the expectations of the folks in our churches, the people who (at least in Baptist polity) have called us to do the work of shepherding them. While we might boldly flout the advice of the church marketing gurus (while tucked away in our offices, miles from actual confrontation with them), we must acknowledge that it is less easy to disappoint those whom we see face to face every Sunday.

Unless you're in an unusual ministry, few if any folks in your church think that the thing they most need from their pastor is a robust dose of sound systematic theology. There are literally hundreds of problems that need to be solved in your church, and these most often look like relationship conflicts and administrative tasks. And so the natural tendency is to devalue the task of studying and teaching theology as a part of the pastoral calling.

And this doesn't even take into account natural inclinations of personality. Many men who pursue pastoral ministry do so, rightly, out of deep affection for people. Given a choice between an afternoon absorbed in their books and an afternoon of counseling (particularly if that counseling involves coffee or golf), they'll be out of their office every time. This is not intended to be, nor should it be understood as, a criticism. Frankly, these are personality traits that are essential to most effective ministry; I envy those men for whom they come naturally. Nothing that follows here should be understood as an attack on these aspects of ministry.

Instead, I merely intend to offer a defense of the importance of theology for doing Christian ministry. If ministry is to be meaningfully Christian, it must be theological. This is what Machen meant when he said, "Here is found the most fundamental difference between liberalism and Christianity—liberalism is altogether in the imperative mood, while Christianity begins with a triumphant indicative; liberalism appeals to man's will, while Christianity announces, first, a gracious act of God."

Machen's insight here is of continuing significance: if our concept of the work of the ministry involves nothing other than the works that we do and the works that we hope to convince or cajole the people in our churches to do, we are functionally liberal. Imperatives, no matter how admirable, are not the sum and substance of the Christian faith. No, the *faith* has content, a content that must be believed. These indicatives of Christianity are of two kinds: the historical facts and their orderly interpretation. As we will see, both the history itself and its interpretation are *theological* in orientation.

Some Initial Biblical Considerations

I will offer further defense of the importance of theology throughout this address, highlighting themes woven throughout Scripture. To begin, however, I want to consider just

a handful of texts that underline the importance of soundness in the faith. I'm not going to offer any kind of in-depth exegesis of these passages; instead, we'll simply survey them, and show that they are gesturing in a particular direction.

Paul makes it clear that the leadership of the church must be characterized by sound doctrine. First, deacons must be sound in the faith (1 Timothy 3:9). What kind of checks do we have in place in our churches to ensure that the men who are set apart to be deacons are qualified in this way? Second, and (hopefully) obviously, a level of theological precision is part of being a qualified pastor: "If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed" (1 Timothy 4:6). Or again, "He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Titus 1:9). And, "But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1).

But the importance of sound doctrine is not confined to the leadership of the church. More generally, we see that Titus is told to sharply rebuke certain false teachers, "that they be sound in the faith" (Titus 1:13). My suspicion here is that Paul is not advocating that the false teachers, having been corrected, immediately be appointed elders in the churches. Rather, he is saying that those in the church, official leaders or not, who advocate false doctrine must receive instruction to have their theology corrected. Further, Jude's famous appeal to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" is addressed to "those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ." There doesn't seem to be a contextual reason to limit rigorous defense of the faith to the leaders of the church; this suggests that all those called to be saints should be instructed in sound theology.

Are We Actually Committed to Serious Theology?

How deeply have we been committed to the faith once delivered to the saints? Has it been the case that, when people think of "us," they think of people who are theologically serious? A relevant point here: who is *us*? There is a legitimate sense in which, if I say that *we* value theology, you might look at me with your head cocked to one side, perhaps looking around my shoulder, asking, "We *who*?"

But if we're being honest, we have to concede that very often, those churches that have identified themselves as *fundamentalists* have, quite ironically, been shoddy doctrinally. Sadly, this has not been entirely by accident, for there have been those who have prided themselves on their theological incompetence. Who among us hasn't heard the tired joke about the student going to "cemetery?" I recall hearing about some Christian leader (I don't remember who) saying that he believes in "no point Calvinism, because there's no point in talking about it." Undoubtedly, many of you could multiply horror stories of inexcusable exegesis and glorified ignorance.

And so I believe there is some room for corporate confession on this account, although perhaps less now than in previous generations. I count myself fortunate, for the generation

of fundamentalism in which I was brought up is one that, at least in aspiration, has valued theology.

Three Ways That Theology Is Important

I suspect that many people in our churches view the Bible as a big book of wisdom, almost as though the whole book is like an extended edition of Proverbs. The passages that can't be forced into that mold (that is, they aren't aphoristic bits of wisdom) are read like Aesop's fables: stories from which we derive a moral (and maybe even a Christian moral). But few people read individual passages in context, much less do what we're suggesting here, which is to read passages in their relation to the entirety of Scripture. Unfortunately, it is not only the folks in our churches who are guilty of this; many a sermon has been preached using the same defective hermeneutic. For pastors, I contend that reading theologically is exceedingly important: not only must you isolate the text from its immediate context, but you should make it a habit to relate the text to its place in the rest of God's revelation. The task of showing the unity of the Bible is a *theological* one.

The foundational assumption that both allows and demands us to do theology is the divine authorship of Scripture. Most of us, I suspect, would not affirm a dictation view of inspiration; instead, we would insist that the human author is truly active in the writing of Scripture. Thus, it is true to say that the Bible is written by a number of different authors. If that were the end of the story, there would be no good reason to suppose that the writings of the Bible should be coherent.

However, because we hold that these different authors wrote under the inspiration of one and the same Spirit of God, we have reason to believe that whatever the apparent tensions that these authors present us, the Bible is fundamentally coherent. Thus, we reject the notion, to choose one example which is common enough in liberal commentaries, that James and Paul were finally and fundamentally at odds with one another, each casting a different basic understanding of the most crucial of doctrines: justification. Rather, our doctrine of inspiration not only allows us to seek the basic coherence of Scripture, but it *demand*s that we do so. We *must* believe that James and Paul are not contradictory. When we preach those passages, it becomes our responsibility to explain them in such a way that our people understand that they are not contradictory. This means that we must do the work of theology.

The coherence of the Bible is of two kinds, and each forms its own discipline of theology. First, there is a coherent *story* to the Bible: this is the foundation for biblical theology. Second, there is coherent *doctrine* in the Bible: this is the foundation for systematic theology. Both biblical and systematic theologies require us to move from the specific teaching of a specific passage to explain how that passage connects to the rest of God's Word. However, the two kinds of theology are different, requiring us to make different kinds of connections.

Biblical theology

The way to think about biblical theology is to remember that the entirety of Scripture tells a coherent story. A pastor who is committed to biblical theology will seek to locate any passage that he is discussing in its place in the broader story of what God is doing in history.

My point here is best illustrated by drawing a distinction between *Bible stories* and the *Bible's story*. Most of us could name several Bible stories, and we might even have some that are particular favorites of ours. What I'm asking us to consider is that none of these stories is best understood in isolation, as a standalone narrative. So, for instance, if we have a Sunday school series in which, each week, we present one story from the Bible and then ask what lesson we can learn from that story, my claim is that we're going to lose something very important in our reading of those texts.

Given that Christianity is what it claims to be, if we are going to have a good understanding of Christianity, we need to gain a grasp of its big story. It is worth our time to consider what it should mean to us that the Bible, as a whole, is a story.

(As an aside: I have found that, in presenting this material to several audiences, some folks are put off by the term *story* with reference to Scripture. Be assured that in using this term I am in no way minimizing the historicity of the biblical narrative. Instead, I am simply emphasizing that it *is* narrative: there are characters, a plot, and other elements common to any story, whether factual or fictional.)

Part of any well-constructed worldview is a big story, which includes all the little stories. In fact, our big story helps us decide which little stories are important and worth telling. For instance, our history books not only tell us *stories*, but they tell us *a story*. Because we have our eye on *the story*, the vast majority of human action throughout time is utterly ignored in these histories as irrelevant. An essentially uncountable number of people and facts are part of history, but we ignore most of them.

- Insignificant people: the farmer who settled in such a place in some year, the chief of an unknown tribe, pastors of congregations, other crucified criminals
- Insignificant details: the favorite colors of King Henry VIII, the pattern of the clouds on March 9, 1059
- Insignificant events: what Galileo had for dinner on some particular day

Why are these stories ignored by the history books? Are they not all facts of history? The reason that the books take no note of such details is that they don't contribute to *the story*. Or, consider this: why didn't anything you did today make the *news*? You could certainly tell me stories about your day today, but for whatever reason, someone has decided that your stories do not meaningfully contribute to "the big story of what's going on in the world."

Occasionally, some argue that this or that figure in history has been overlooked and should be given more attention; history books are sometimes rewritten. And for some, this

provokes outrage. Why? It is not always because the “new history” didn’t happen, but because changing the story carries with it a change of values; it suggests that *this* is more important than *that*.

This is what I mean when I distinguish between a little story and a big story. I am not suggesting that little stories are unneeded or that they are without value. What we think of as *Bible stories* can be, and almost always are, taught as little stories. But here is the point: if these smaller stories are cut off from the big story which gives them significance, they often merely function as parables or illustration of moral lessons. If we reduce the stories of Scripture to this status, Christianity really is no different than any other religion. We all just use different stories to teach the same basic lessons.

By way of contrast, the big story of the Bible gives us:

- a framework for the meaningfulness of good and evil. Here, an illustrative contrast can be drawn between the biblical story and the big story of naturalistic evolution. Given naturalism, the universe was at one time cold and dark and impersonal, and one day, it will again be cold and dark and impersonal. Given such a story, the intervening events, against the big picture, simply don’t matter. They have no ultimate significance. By contrast, the biblical story, with its structure of creation and judgment, does account for the significance of human activity. Actions can be *truly* good and bad; we are faced with responsibilities to our Creator God.
- the means by which we determine good guys and bad guys. The Creator/creature distinction that is established in Genesis 1 is never erased. In biblical terms, then, a key element of virtue is acknowledging that God is God and that we are not. Given this story, virtue cannot be established apart from this confession.
- the means for evaluating our own actions. Because a story implies a teleology (an endpoint or purpose), and because we know who the true hero of the biblical story is, we have a reference point for judging whether our actions are toward that same end, or whether we have another end in mind altogether.
- direction for our choices. Given all of this, we can see that a grasp of biblical theology actually gives very practical direction for the choices that I must make.

What, then, is this big story? As there are conflicting versions of systematic theology (Calvinism/Arminianism, etc.), there are also conflicting versions of biblical theology. The one I offer to you today (in a very compressed form) is heavily influenced by Alva J. McClain’s *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. He contends that the storyline of the Bible is primarily about God establishing a kingdom to be ruled by his Son. We see this even in the creation account (in which Adam fails in his task as the mediatorial king of creation), through the establishment of the nation of Israel (as God’s kingdom on earth), and promised in the prophets (with a restored kingdom of God ruled by Christ). The kingdom is offered and rejected in the gospels, and the epistles explain what it means to live as a citizen of the kingdom while awaiting its arrival.

Such a sketch is obviously too brief. That said, it does provide us enough of an outline to illustrate its usefulness. For instance, the book of Judges is not merely a collection of stories

about the failures of God's people and God's merciful deliverance of them. No, a clue to the meaning of the book is found in the repeated summary, "In those days, there was no king in Israel, and every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The book was apparently written when Israel *did* have a king, and the key point that we're supposed to derive from the book is this: we need a king. Life is a disaster without a king. The book is intended to make us long for a king. So while there are enough exciting stories in Judges (Gideon! Samson!) to fill several flannelgraph boards, telling those stories without connecting them to the overarching point of the book (which, in turn, points to the broader storyline of the Bible) does our listeners an injustice. The same point is illustrated in Ruth: the book holds us in suspense until the very end, when the connection to the Davidic monarchy is revealed.

So then, in light of the bigger story, how do we interpret the smaller stories? We should not read them as allegories or as (mere) morality tales. An example from Fee/Stuart: while the Jacob/Esau narrative may illustrate that parental favoritism is a bad idea, that's not what the story is *about*. Both of these approaches to the text (allegory and moralism) are temptations because we naturally see *our story* as most important. The biblical stories, we think, are only meaningful if they shape *our lives* in some direct and obvious way. But we must realize (again, from Fee/Stuart) that no Bible narrative was written specifically about *you*.

What, then, are the advantages of attending to biblical theology in the church?

1. Keeps Jesus and the gospel central to message of the church. Furthermore, it gives shape to this message of Jesus and the gospel. The good news of Jesus is not necessarily good news for everyone. The good news is that Jesus *will have* his kingdom. It is not *primarily* that God has a wonderful plan for your life, even if we say that that plan is eternal and spiritual
2. Highlights the importance of the church itself. Throughout Scripture, we see that God is not merely interested in saving people, but in saving *a people*. Understanding that the Bible is *God's* story works to undermine the rampant individualism that characterizes (American) Christians.
3. Highlights the importance of the big systems of reading the Bible (dispensationalism and covenant theology). Among other things, these systems seek to answer the question, "How does the story of the Bible hold together?"
4. Avoids the peril of mere moralism. Remember Machen's dictum about the difference between liberal and evangelical theology: it all has to do with the relationship of the indicative and the imperative. The indicative of Christianity is first a *historical* indicative: certain events happened. If we fail to emphasize this, we immediately revert to the notion that the Bible is really all about us.
5. Provides a counternarrative to that offered by the world: your values are in large degree shaped by the story of the world that you tell yourself. Story is an important

part of a person's worldview; if we fail to impart the biblical story to our people, others will certainly offer alternatives.

6. Shapes our view of the Christian life in forcing us to link ourselves to God's overarching purposes in the world. Thus, it is not the case that we have a story into which God comes as a supporting character, providing bits of pithy wisdom and the occasional new car (reducing God to a sort of cosmic Oprah). Rather, God is telling a story in which we of necessity play a part, either coming to love the ultimate victory of God or resisting it and ultimately destroyed.

An aside: it may be that our sermons make this connection (our text's place in the story of Scripture) explicit, or that it is left unmentioned. The text that you preach will determine in large measure how much needs to be said. What is absolutely vital, however, is that the *pastor* is aware of the connections, having thought through them himself.

Systematic theology

Systematic theology seeks to coordinate the various passages of Scripture into topical categories, organized around doctrinal interests. Traditional categories of systematic theology include theology proper, christology, pneumatology, bibliology, anthropology, hamartiology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology.

I have chosen to address biblical theology before systematic theology. To illustrate why, consider the following quotation from B. B. Warfield:

“Systematic theology” is attended with no such drawbacks. It properly describes the department to which it is attached, according to its own nature: it is the department in which the truths concerning God, given to us by the other departments of theological science, are systematized and presented in their proper relations to one another and to the whole of which they form parts.

Even taking into account some flexibility in the word *proper*, we should pause a bit at Warfield's definition. In what way is the organization of revelation as it is in systematic theology an expression of the *proper* relations of these truths? Here's my concern: we must remember, as we read our Bibles, that God did not choose to give us systematic theology textbooks. I am about to make the claim that systematic theology is deeply important, but we need to remember its *secondary* nature. Special revelation has come to us in exactly the form that God intended. Systematic theology gives us some distinct advantages in understanding that revelation, but it cannot be substituted for it.

Doctrine properly comes after story. Doctrine summarizes, in propositions, elements of the plot. It forces us to think clearly, to untangle that which might be implied. On the surface, stories are often capable of many interpretations. Only when we tease out the implications of the story in doctrine do we see potential contradictions with other parts of the story. Furthermore, because stories can have multiple interpretations, God gives us interpretation of the Christian story. For instance, we know that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the

judgment of God for their wickedness, because the text of Scripture does more than recount the phenomena: it also interprets the events. It is not sufficient to believe that Jesus died (history); we must believe that he died *for our sins* (doctrine). For Christians, the major source of the doctrine of the story is from the apostle Paul (Ephesians 3:1–6).

The question for us today is this: is systematic theology *necessary*? Let me ask what I take to be the same question in a slightly more provocative way: should we allow our system of theology to shape our reading of the texts of Scripture? Here's my short answer: our system of theology *will inevitably* shape our reading of the text. The question is really whether we will be honest with ourselves about it, and therefore be aware of it, or whether we will deny it and allow its influence to reign unchecked. It's been said before: there is no man so bound by his traditions as the man who denies that he has any tradition.

Let's start with an obvious example: our understanding of bibliology has a deep influence on how we read the text. Assuming that you believe that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God, you do not have the option, when coming to a passage that bothers you at some level, of simply excising it from the text. You have to realize that that very impulse to submit to the Word is a *theological position* that you bring to the text. You might protest that your position on this matter is not a theological one, but rather one that is directly drawn from certain Scriptures. That is fine: note that you're assuming then something about the authority of *those* Scriptures.

In this way, certain kinds of preunderstandings shape our reading of the text. We already have an idea of what the Bible is about, what kind of book it is, etc. For the most part, these preunderstandings are transparent to us. They tend to become apparent only when we end up in a conversation with someone who does not share them: a new convert, perhaps, or a cult member, or a liberal Christian.

As we read the Bible, our storehouse of preunderstandings is enriched. This phenomenon has been compared to a spiral: we come to the text with certain understandings, which are modified by subsequent readings, so that our further reading of the text is likely to be more accurate, which further shapes our understanding, etc. Each time around the circle, our preunderstandings should become more biblical, so that our next time around the circle, we are in a better position to understand the particulars of a passage.

It has been said that we all do theology, but that the question is whether we do it well or poorly. This is certainly the case here. When you pastor, particularly if you are given to preaching through long sections of Scripture, you will encounter passages which present you with apparent conflicts with other passages. Even if these don't raise questions in your mind, they will do so in the minds of those listening to you. And, again, if you believe that the Bible is ultimately written by one God, who is not given to error or contradiction, you need to be able to articulate some answer to these questions.

Let's start with a very basic example: Psalm 61:4 is addressed to God and speaks of taking "refuge under the shelter of your wings." Does God have wings? We are told elsewhere in

Scripture that God is spirit. As will be a recurring theme, you must do *something* about this text, and what you do will be *theology*.

The examples here are nearly limitless. Does Hebrews 6 teach us that it is possible for true believers to renounce the faith and ultimately be damned? When God tells Abraham, “Now I know that you love me,” does this indicate that God lacked knowledge until seeing how Abraham responded to the command to sacrifice Isaac?

Dr. McCune always told us that our alternatives were either a systematic theology or a brushpile theology, and this seems to me to be basically right. While we can certainly hold our positions with greater and lesser certainty, if we refuse any attempt to reconcile the challenging passages of Scripture, we will simply present the Bible as incoherent.

There is no refuge to be found in biblicism, either. Biblicism, as a general description of one’s commitments, is unobjectionable. I agree that the Bible is our final authority in all matters of doctrine. The problem is that the claim to be a biblicist is merely a statement about a *methodology*; it is not a statement of a position. People will say, “I am neither a Calvinist or an Arminian; I am a biblicist.” The confusion of this statement becomes more evident if we substitute another debate: “I’m neither premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial; I’m a biblicist.” If someone were to say the latter, we’d congratulate them for their allegiance to Scripture, and then ask them for some description of *what they actually believe*, because they haven’t yet told us anything of that.

Taking theology seriously simply means doing the work of relating the various passages of Scripture to each other, with the undergirding assumption of the unity of the Bible.

What are the advantages of attending to systematic theology in the church?

1. Shapes our ability to read other passages more accurately: we do bring our background assumptions to our reading of the text of Scripture. It becomes exceedingly important that these assumptions become more and more biblical, as having these kinds of assumptions will allow us to read the rest of Scripture more accurately.
2. Feeds worship, as we recognize the depths of the Christian faith and our finitude. The end of any deeply theological thinking should be doxology: “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” If we fail to pursue theology to any depth, we simply cannot feel the impact of what Paul is saying here. Our confession that “God know more than we do” will be a hollow thing if we have made no effort to see what we can know. It is when we have *exhausted* our search for biblical understanding, when we then realize that God’s knowledge is still infinitely beyond ours, that we are left awed.

3. Forces the church to be aware of potential internal contradictions in its message. It is entirely appropriate for the Christian to appeal to mystery. In fact, we can go further: if we have no need for mystery as a theological category, Christianity is false. Mystery (for us) exists because of the Creator/creature distinction. While there is never *ultimate* mystery (for all things are fully known by God, because decreed by God), our finitude will always be apparent in our attempts to know. That said, mystery is not a free pass for intellectual laziness.
4. Allows us to gain better perspective on what is centrally important to sound doctrine versus what is more peripheral: errors which threaten the gospel are always more important. Those who fail to think theologically will almost always fall into one of two ditches: 1) raising every biblical teaching to the highest level, and denying Christian fellowship to anyone who disagrees with them (or their church) to any degree, or 2) degrading the importance of biblical teaching on everything but the most elementary Christian beliefs, so that crucial differences of biblical interpretation are simply papered over.
5. Reshapes priorities: theology is practical. For instance, what does it mean to *work out* our salvation? Does salvation involve works? You will not be able to answer that question properly without invoking categories like *justification* and *sanctification*. This again points us back to Machen's dictum: part of the indicative that grounds the imperative of the Christian life is *doctrine*. Paul's writing is the supreme example; very many of his letters begin with several chapters of extensive theology, with a turn to the practical (accompanied by the telling *therefore*) only afterward. Our preaching should mirror Paul's example.

Closing note: historical theology

As our discussion of systematic theology demonstrates, we all owe debts to our teachers. None of us ever come to the text without any preconceived notions of what the passage can and can't be saying. Again, no one is more in the clutches of tradition than the man who denies that he has any tradition.

We would all do well to remember that so many things which seem to us to be *obvious* in Scripture are so as a result of hard-won victories by previous generations of theologians. Even our core commitment, to one God in three persons, was not obtained by some single Christian getting alone with his Bible. Rather, the very sharpest minds in Christ's church wrestled with various ways of articulating this relationship for 400 years. It should not surprise us, then, that whenever there is some attempt to get "back to the Bible alone," discarding everything which we have received from the teachers gifted to the church, we very often see an abandonment of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

The discipline of *historical theology* gives attention to the development of doctrine over time. If we're going to take historical theology seriously, we're going to have to be doubly counter-cultural, for both our society in general, and Protestantism in particular, press us to

view tradition as an impediment to sound theology, rather than as an asset. As Carl Trueman says,

Of course, Protestantism has always had the potential of providing fertile soil for a theology and a church culture which disparages tradition. The notion of scriptural authority as articulated by the Reformers and by subsequent Reformed and Lutheran thinkers inevitably subordinated church tradition to the Bible. It created a situation where tradition could, where necessary, be abandoned. They regarded the Bible as the sole source of revelation and that inevitably meant Protestants were far more critical and selective in their approach to the church's dogmatic tradition than was typically the case in medieval Catholicism. Nevertheless the Reformers and the subsequent tradition never intended this notion of scriptural authority to act as the means for a wholesale rejection of the church's theological traditions in themselves; they saw it simply as a critical tool by which those traditions could be continuously critiqued and reformed.

At a more mundane level, the application of this crude Scripture principle can be seen in the everyday life and practices of evangelical churches around the world where cries of 'No creed but the Bible,' preaching which fails to draw biblical exegesis into theological synthesis, and a disregard for historic patterns of worship and confession, are offered in all seriousness as examples of fidelity to the authority of Scripture. The underlying assumption seems to be that the Protestant notion of scriptural authority can only exist with an iconoclastic attitude to tradition, a position the Reformers themselves would have repudiated. This kind of neo-Socinianism, whether at the level of ideology or of practice, is one response of the church to the challenge of modernity and consumerism.

Becoming Serious About Theology

Here's where we move to practical suggestions. In some ways, I hesitate at this point, because I want to insist that there really aren't shortcuts to gaining a good grasp of the entirety of Scripture. The Bible is simply just too extensive for that. It would be akin to one with a casual familiarity with the works of Shakespeare (but especially with his most popular works), who needs to give three weekly one-hour lectures to an English class. Playing catch-up, at that point, is going to be a struggle.

That said, the situation is not utterly hopeless, if one is willing to work hard. For those who are able, there is really nothing that substitutes for a good theological education. But these days, even for those who are already in ministry, there are more resources than ever for increasing our competence as pastor-theologians. Not only is there an endless supply of books, but several seminaries offer free courses that can be downloaded. In addition, there are various means of pursuing distance education. None of us has reached the point at which we can coast theologically for the rest of our ministries. All of us, to borrow a cliché from the education industry, need to be lifelong learners.

For those simply looking for a place to start, we need to remember that one's biblical theology, systematic theology, and hermeneutic are all interdependent. We cannot change one without changing the others, and we cannot adopt a provisionally *neutral* attitude toward these questions either. So while I offer the following as something as a strategy,

1. Allow your theology of God and Scripture to inform your hermeneutic. Given the character of God, given our theology of the image of God and the nature of language, what conclusions can we draw about how we can expect God to communicate in his Word? How will we find meaning? How stable is that meaning?
2. Settle on some interpretive framework on the big questions of biblical theology. I've already advocated Alva McClain's *The Greatness of the Kingdom*; this is me seconding my earlier recommendation.
3. Gather a number of sound systematic theologies. A really great place to start is the Detroit Seminary basic booklist (<http://dbts.edu/pdf/Booklist.pdf>); it lists books in each discipline of systematic theology. Do two things with your theology books. First, establish the habit of reading them, even a bit at a time. It establishes a good frame of mind. Second, when doing sermon preparation, consult the Scripture index in a couple of good systematic theologies, to see if your passage is cited. This will give you a good idea of the kinds of theological issues that your passage is relevant to. Again, you may not feel the need to add everything you find to your sermon, but you will at least be aware of the theological connections.