

CHAPTER ONE

The Pastor as Scholar: A Personal Journey and the Joyful Place of Scholarship

John Piper

This chapter has two parts. First is the story of my pilgrimage to the pastorate, and second is the way “scholarship” relates to the overarching theme of my ministry—that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him. The story I tell, from the time I was a boy in high school to the stage in life where I am now, has an angle to it, namely, highlighting the factors along the way that shaped me into the kind of pastor I am today, for good or for ill. The very fact that I am approaching the topic of pastor-scholar this way is immediately part of what you should learn about what makes me tick as a pastor, and how this relates to scholarship. Don’t hold your breath waiting for me to say something about making room for academic scholarship in the busy life of a pastor.

Part One: The Making of a Pastor-Scholar

From one angle this approach is typically American—we Americans, in general, more quickly bare our souls to the world than many cultures do. For example, F. F. Bruce, rep-

resenting the British of a generation ago (and perhaps much like today's), said at the end of his autobiography:

While some readers have observed that in these chapters I have said little about my domestic life, others have wondered why I have been so reticent about my religious experience. The reason is probably the same in both instances: I do not care to speak much—especially in public—about the things that mean most to me. Others do not share this inhibition, and have enriched their fellows by relating the inner story of the Lord's dealings with them—one thinks of Augustine's *Confessions* and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. But it calls for quite exceptional qualities to be able to do this kind of thing without self-consciousness or self-deception.¹

So now you can see I am trapped. My first reaction when I read this was to say, "No wonder I have found his commentaries so dry"—helpful in significant ways, but personally and theologically anemic. My second reaction was to say (this was in 1980, the year I left academia and entered the pastorate), "Good grief! You say, 'I do not care to speak much—especially in public—about the things that mean most to me.' I say, 'The *only* thing I care to speak about—especially in public—are the things that mean most to me!'"

Zero Empathy

Both his and my statements are probably overstatements. But seriously, this is one of the differences between me and many scholars, and it is part of what pushed me out of the guild. I am regularly bursting to say something about the

most precious things in the universe—and not in any disinterested, dispassionate, composed, detached, unemotional, so-called scholarly way, but rather with total interest, warm passion, discomposure, utter attachment, and fully emotional, and, I hope always, *true*. At least *true* is my goal.

I am with Jonathan Edwards all the way when he says:

I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as possibly I can, provided that they are affected with nothing but truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with.²

Of course, my assumption is, for Edwards and for myself, that in our aim to raise the affections of our hearers, we have experienced authentically raised affections ourselves. And these affections are in synch with what is true and in proportion to the nature of the truth.

So I have zero empathy with F. F. Bruce and others when they say (sometimes in the name of personality, and others in the name of scholarly objectivity), "I do not care to speak much—especially in public—about the things that mean most to me." Nor do I care if they say a theological lecture or a critical scholarly commentary is not the place for that.

But now you can see that he has me trapped, because he says, "Others do not share this inhibition, and have enriched their fellows by relating the inner story of the Lord's dealings with them—one thinks of Augustine's *Confessions* and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. But it calls for quite exceptional qualities to be able to do this kind of thing without self-

consciousness or self-deception." So, to follow the course I have set for myself, I must think myself in the possession of "exceptional qualities" and perhaps be in the ranks of Augustine and Bunyan! What shall I do?

There is another possibility—in fact, there are several. One is that I do not have "exceptional qualities," and I may just be stupid to take this approach. Another possibility is that I may be egotistical and vain. The Internet world we live in today is awash in narcissism and vanity, with some people taking their clothes off literally, because exposure gives them a rush, and others doing it spiritually—because the addicting power of talking about yourself, where anyone in the world can read it, is overpowering.

I put Philippians 2:3 before me regularly with its piercing word *kenodoxian* (vainglory): "Do nothing from rivalry or vainglory [*kenodoxian*], but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3 AT). The love of human praise—human glory—is universal and deadly.

Jesus said, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" (John 5:44).³ You can't. You can't believe in the crucified Messiah as your supreme treasure and hero, and then love the exact opposite of the mind-set that took him to the cross.

So, in pursuing an autobiographical approach in this chapter, I may be stupid, or I may be vain. Or another possibility is that I may be Pauline.

We do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly

burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. (2 Cor. 1:8–9)

I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged. (Col. 2:1–2)

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. (Phil. 1:12–13)

In other words, Paul repeatedly talks about his personal life and experience with God with a view to helping his listeners. So, yes, this approach is risky. But there are reasons for it.

Maybe I'm Not One

One of my reasons involves a huge assumption. I assume that one of the main reasons I was asked to contribute to this book with Don Carson is that somebody thinks I am one of these—a pastor-scholar. Depending on the definition, I'm not sure I am. And so I thought maybe I should tell my story about how I got to be the way I am, and you could decide if I am or not. Or *in what sense* I am or am not. And if that's a good thing or not. And what the implications are for you and for the church.

So I'm going to look at six chapters of my life through the lens of this question: What were the impulses toward scholarship and the pastorate? And along the way you will pick up on what I mean by *scholarship* and *pastoring*.

Early Youth

When I was six years old at a motel in Florida on vacation with my family, I prayed with my mother and affirmed my faith in Jesus as my Savior. My parents were Christians, and my father was an evangelist. I loved them, admired them, and embraced the truth that they taught me. The influence of my father was huge, and I admired him as a preacher.

But very quickly I knew that I would never be a preacher because by the time I was in junior high school, I could not speak in front of any group. I was paralyzed with anxiety about it and trembled so terribly and choked up so completely that it was physically impossible to read or speak before any size group. Don't imagine your average person with butterflies. Imagine physical impossibility. So preaching and the pastorate were totally ruled out of my dreams.

Moreover, there was no apparent vision for *scholarship* in my home. It was not even a category in our minds, or a word in our vocabulary. My father had a library and a study at home, but I never thought about it. I saw my father's Greek New Testament, but I never saw him use it or heard him refer to using it—though I noted that it was marked up and that it was used once upon a time.

So *pastoring* was not an option because of my disability (or whatever it was), and *scholarship* was a nonexistent

category when I went to high school. But I was a believer. I loved Jesus. I hated sin. I feared God in a good way. I took heaven and hell and salvation and the gospel very seriously. They were dominant realities in my life. And so the seeds of ministry were there. But there was no dream to be a pastor and no awareness that there even was such a thing as scholarship.

High School Days

In high school, there was a double awakening; one was intellectual and the other was emotional and expressive. On the intellectual side, there was advanced biology and tenth-grade geometry. These stand out as very significant.

The process of reasoning from axioms and postulates and corollaries in order to turn theories into proofs was explosively exciting to me. I loved the ability to draw right conclusions from true premises. Geometry class marked a serious awakening of my love for right thinking. From that time to this, I have had an ear and an eye for non sequiturs in what I hear and read. If a politician or preacher says, "All cows have four legs; Fido has four legs; therefore Fido is a cow," I'm all over it. From that class on, I have had a self-conscious expectation that I will never knowingly be illogical or incoherent.

Then there was Mrs. Clanton's advanced biology class where we dissected worms and frogs and fetal pigs and bred tsetse flies. Many of you have heard the story of Agassiz's Fish,⁴ about the naturalist who demanded of his student that he sit and stare at a fish for a week to learn all he could. Well,

Mrs. Clanton was like that. The point of all this dissection was to awaken in us the crucial discipline of accurate and thorough observation. Do you see what's really in the pig? All the sharp reasoning in the world will simply lead you astray if you start with observations that are inaccurate or incomplete.

It was no surprise to me then in seminary when Agassiz's Fish was used in a hermeneutics class,⁵ and when in Germany I read the New Testament scholar Adolf Schlatter, "Die Wissenschaft ist erstens Beobachtung, zweitens Beobachtung, drittens Beobachtung" ("Science/scholarship is first observation, second observation, third observation"). So what happened in Mrs. Clanton's biology class was the awakening of a self-conscious awareness that dependable knowledge—of the world or the Bible or anything else—depends on seeing what's really there for the mind to work with.

These were two huge impulses feeding into who I am in ministry: painstaking observation of texts and the demand for precise thinking—from myself and from others.

Two other awakenings in high school have never gone away. One was the passion to write, and the other was the bent toward poetry. My father sowed the seeds of poetry, because he wrote poems for special occasions, and he read poems to the family. Even in the months before his death at 87, I would ask him to read his poems to me, and he would weep at certain points as he read about his six-year-old son.

But all of that lay dormant until the spring of 1963 during my junior year. In my English class, the desire to read serious books and the desire to write serious essays

and poems was born. This has never gone away. Writing has been an almost daily habit since then—in one form or another—notes, letters, journal entries, poems, ideas, reports, essays, sermons, and more.

Writing became the lever of my thinking and the outlet of my feelings. If I didn't pull the lever, the wheel of thinking did not turn. It jerked and squeaked and halted. But once a pen was in hand, or a keyboard, the fog began to clear and the wheel of thought began to spin with more clarity and insight. And when the feelings that rumbled around in my heart as an introverted, insecure adolescent needed form, I turned to poetry and writing. So along with the disciplines of precise thinking and painstaking observation came a passion for conceptually clear and emotionally moving expression in writing.

Two last things remain to be underlined about high school. I knew when I was done that I could not speak in front of any group, and I was deeply troubled and anxious about my future—what kind of job would help me avoid that? And I knew also that I read painfully slowly. To this day, I cannot read faster than I can talk. Something short-circuits in my ability to perceive accurately what's on the page, when I try to push beyond that—probably some form of dyslexia. Those two disabilities, paralysis before people and painfully slow reading, I knew would keep me out of any profession that demanded great quantities of reading and any public speaking.

But Jesus was real to me. I turned to him in my sorrows. I loved my church. I hated sin. I feared God. I believed in the

Bible and in heaven and hell. Somehow, my life had to count. But I did not know how.

Wheaton College

The season at Wheaton was enormously influential in fanning the flames that had been lit in high school—the intellectual stimulation, the emotional deepening, the passion to write. In one sense, my college and seminary days relate to each other as form and substance. The college days solidified passions and habits of mind; the seminary days defined what the focus of those habits would be, namely, God and his Word and his people.

The influences of these days can be grouped under the mind, the heart, the synthesis, and the bridge to ministry.

Mind

Arthur Holmes and Stuart Hackett were both in the philosophy department at Wheaton in the late sixties. Holmes embodied two things I had never seen before: (1) the quest for a comprehensive worldview that helped make sense of everything—and that had Christ as the integrating center—and (2) the life of the mind as vocation. In other words, Christian scholarship as a vocation came onto my horizon as a possibility for the first time in my life.

Stuart Hackett was probably one of the two most influential teachers I had at Wheaton, not because of the theology he held but because of the way he thought. I had only two classes with him, and the content of every class session seemed to me to be the same—and never boring. He was the

philosophical embodiment of what geometry had meant to me in the tenth grade.

The point of every class seemed to be: any system of thought that denies truth denies itself. In other words, he modeled the universal significance of the law of noncontradiction: if you say there's no truth, then you've just spoken something that doesn't count. That simple insight has been life-saving and life-illuminating for over forty years. It spared me from being enamored by all the ludicrous post-modernism that was already rampant in the late 1960s. Thank you, Dr. Hackett.

Francis Schaeffer burst on the scene in the fall of 1965 and had the effect of taking all the intellectual awakening and showing us that it could be culturally and evangelistically engaging. In other words, he seemed to embody a way of taking all the scholarly impulses of the ivory tower and putting them to personal and social use for the sake of Christ in the world. So his particular way of doing apologetics had the effect of helping many of us believe that the intellectual awakening we were experiencing at Wheaton could really be a blessing in the world more broadly than we thought.

Another influence at Wheaton was the students. Never had I been around so many intellectually engaged young people. It had a double effect. One was to pour gasoline on the fires lit by the professors. The other was to remind me of my weaknesses. Because of this kind of expectation in the classroom, I was not an outstanding student at Wheaton. My GPA, if I remember correctly was what today would be

about a 3.2. I was a B student, not an A student. Therefore, I never thought of myself as becoming a front-ranking anything. I was not superior in any way at Wheaton.

Heart

Along with these intellectual springs bubbling up, there was another river flowing. My love of reading and writing led me to be a literature major. The literature faculty was renowned. I took every poetry class that Wheaton offered. And I avoided every novel class that was offered. I could not read fast enough to get through the novels in a semester, but I could write and analyze poetry. So I carefully navigated my way through a lit major as one of the slowest readers on campus.

Mainly poetry was chosen because the emotions of a young man can run deep in the river of poetry. Clyde Kilby was a giant in the lit department in those days, and his book *Poetry and Life* was lived in front of us in class. Kilby took the passion for observation and breathed a kind of life into it that biology never could. He taught me that there is always more to see in what I see. There is always wonder. There is always something to be astonished about. There is mental health in learning to look at a tree or a cloud or a nose, and to marvel that it is what it is. This then became poetry. When you finally see the wonder of what you have been looking at for ten years, what you do with that seeing is try to say it—and that is what poetry is.

One of his resolutions for being a healthy person reads like this:

I shall open my eyes and ears. Once every day, I shall simply stare at a tree, a flower, a cloud, a person. I shall not then be concerned at all to ask what they are, but simply be glad that they are. I shall joyfully allow them the mystery of what Lewis calls, "their divine, magical, terrifying, and ecstatic existence."⁶

When you are being shown what you've always looked at all your life and never seen, it is absolutely revolutionary. Kilby was one of the greatest influences of my life, and I scarcely know what he thought about anything—politically, psychologically, theologically. It was the *way* he saw the world and spoke of the world. He was so alive to the wonder of things. This was incalculably valuable preparation of soul for the vision of God that would come just a few years later at seminary.

In this section on heart belongs Noël Henry. She has been my wife for over forty years. But in those days, starting in the summer of 1966, she was this ravishing object of desire. Oh, how I wanted to be married to Noël. Falling in love is very powerful. Not in vain does the Song of Solomon say, "I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases" (Song 8:4). The effects of finding a wife are so pervasive and long lasting that they are immeasurable, so here is where she entered my life, and nothing has been the same since. I owe her more than anyone else in the world.

Synthesis

The synthesis of mind and heart was embodied in C. S. Lewis. Lewis became for me in my college days what Jonathan Edwards became in my seminary days—a towering figure of intellectual and emotional influence. He was a “romantic rationalist”—that was the name of a small book about Lewis that got me very excited because it summed up what I thought I was (which may be very akin to “pastor-scholar”). His influence on me is great and varied.

Lewis embodied the fact that rigorous, precise, penetrating logic is not inimical to deep, soul-stirring feeling and vivid, lively—even playful—imagination. He combined what almost everybody today assumes are mutually exclusive: rationalism and poetry, cool logic and warm feeling, disciplined prose and free imagination. In shattering these old stereotypes for me, he freed me to think hard and to write poetry, to argue for the resurrection and compose hymns to Christ, to smash an argument and hug a friend, to demand a definition and use a metaphor.

Lewis was the main influence on Clyde Kilby, and Lewis had the same effect on me as Kilby did. He gave me an intense sense of the “realness” of things. To wake up in the morning and be aware of the firmness of the mattress, the warmth of the sun rays, the sound of the clock ticking, the sheer being of things (“quiddity” as he called it). He helped me become alive to life. He helped me see what is there in the world—things which if we didn’t have, we would pay a million dollars to have, but having them, ignore.

Finally, he has made me wary of chronological snobbery.

That is, he has shown me that “newness” is no virtue and “oldness” is no fault. Truth and beauty and goodness are not determined by when they exist. Nothing is inferior for being old, and nothing is valuable for being modern. This has freed me from the tyranny of novelty.

These were immeasurable gifts and had the effect of synthesizing my Wheaton experience. The intellectual stimulation, the emotional deepening, the stirring of imagination, the passion to write—all of these came together in C. S. Lewis and made me wonder if I should teach English literature as a vocation.⁷

The Bridge to Ministry

There were other key factors that God was putting in place that were going to determine the direction all this energy would take. I’ll mention four. Together these are the bridge that God built to seminary and the ministry of the Word.

First came the momentous summer of ‘66. Not only did I meet Noël, but chaplain Evan Welsh asked me to pray in summer school chapel. For reasons I cannot recall or imagine, I said yes. That meant standing in front of about five hundred students and faculty and praying for about one minute (maximum). Never in my life had I been able to do such a thing in front of ten, let alone five hundred. I vowed to God on front campus: *If you will get me through this without my choking and becoming paralyzed, I will never again say no to a speaking opportunity out of fear.* He answered that prayer, and I believe something broke. And I think I have kept my vow.

Harold John Ockenga came to preach in chapel in the fall of 1966. I was lying in the campus health center with mono as I listened to him on the radio. And God created in my heart at that time a desire to study and understand and teach the Word of God that has never died. It is as alive and strong today as it ever was. So the bridge to seminary was being built. I was on my way to a clear biblical focus for all the intellect and emotion and imagination and writing that were being awakened and deepened at Wheaton.

Then came John Stott and *Men Made New*, a little yellow paperback of an exposition of Romans 5–8. I loved it. It was fuel on the flame that Ockenga had lit, and it showed me the kind of careful attention to the text that, for me, made it live.

Then came Urbana '67 where Stott again opened 2 Timothy in a week of messages and where the utter indispensability of global missions hit home.

With all of that (the anxiety breakthrough, the call of God through Ockenga, the modeling of John Stott, the impulse of missions), the bridge was built to pursue the study of God's Word in seminary. I did not know what I would do with it vocationally. All I knew is that everything that God had done in my life was getting me ready to study his Word and somehow use it for the church and missions.

Fuller Seminary

When I went to Fuller, I was detached from the local church. In college I had not seriously engaged with one local church. That was foolish and immature. It continued

for a few months in seminary, and then I got married and knew I needed to grow up. Noël and I went to Lake Avenue Congregational Church where Ray Ortlund Sr. was the senior pastor. There we fell in love with the church—the local church of real people with real relationships. By the time we were done, Noël was caring for the mentally disabled, and I had taught seventh grade, ninth grade, and young marrieds. We were in five different small groups. Eventually, four years after I left to go to graduate school, I was ordained at that church. Never again did I play fast and loose with my attachment to the local church. To cut yourself off from a local church with a sense of self-sufficiency is, in the long run, suicidal.

In seminary, explosive things were happening in my soul. I was watching the agony and the ecstasy of the new evangelicalism struggling to break free from the anti-intellectualism and cultural distance of fundamentalism into an intellectual and cultural engagement that would be respected in the guild. Some of these men paid with their lives and their families and their health in the struggle to find scholarly credibility. George Ladd was almost undone emotionally and professionally by a critical review of his *Jesus and the Kingdom* by Norman Perrin of the University of Chicago. And when his *New Testament Theology* was a stunning success ten years later, he walked through the halls shouting and waving a \$9,000 royalty check.

The scholarly discipline of Geoffrey Bromiley, who translated all of Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, was awe-inspiring. But the sophomoric belittling

of fundamentalists in some classes by younger faculty was disappointing. This faculty was on a quest to put orthodoxy on the map intellectually. So it was a heady place in the late sixties.

For me it proved to be the most decisive time of my life theologically and methodologically. And the key living person under God was Daniel Fuller. Emotionally and personally, he was as imperfect as the rest of them. (Now I would say, "the rest of us.") But in his brokenness, he put so many things together for me.

Nobody thought more rigorously than Dan Fuller. Nobody was more riveted on the biblical text in his exegetical method than Dan Fuller. We called his approach "arc-ing," and it has been the methodological key for much of what I have seen in the Bible for the past forty years. Nobody was more jealous to think the author's thoughts after him, because that's what meaning was—the author's intention (E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* was compelling).

Nobody was more practically committed to the truth and authority of Scripture than Dan Fuller. Nobody communicated a greater gravity of the ultimate things at stake in biblical truth. Nobody was more vulnerable to students' questions or took them more seriously than Dan Fuller. He would linger for hours after class with us. And he would stay up late writing answers to our questions and then bring the paper the next day to try out his fresh thoughts on us.

Nobody was more committed to showing that much reading is not the essence of scholarship, but that assiduous, detailed, meticulous, logical analysis of great texts can lift

you to the level of the greatest minds. Nobody pierced to the essence of true scholarship the way Dan Fuller did. In partnership with Mortimer Adler's *How to Read a Book*, he taught me that the task of the true scholar, whatever his vocation, was:

- to *observe* his subject matter accurately and thoroughly;
- to *understand* clearly what he has observed;
- to *evaluate* fairly what he has understood by deciding what is true and valuable;
- to *feel* intensely according to the value of what he has evaluated;
- to *apply* wisely and helpfully in life what he understands and feels; and
- to *express* in speech and writing and deeds what he has seen, understood, felt, and applied in such a way that its accuracy, clarity, truth, value, and helpfulness can be known and enjoyed by others.

By all of this singularly blood-earnest scholarship, he introduced me, through Scripture and through Jonathan Edwards, to the truth that *God is most glorified in us when I am most satisfied in him*. This was the seed from which has grown all the books I have written and all the sermons I have preached. The fact that God pursued his glory and my joy in the same act of worship was the most explosive truth I have ever learned. The sources were the Bible and then Jonathan Edwards.

I recall the day in class when Fuller was accused of being too rational by a student from the new school of psychology. Fuller responded by saying, "Why can't we be like Jonathan Edwards, who in one moment could be writing a devotion



that would warm your grandmother's heart and in the next give a philosophical argument that would stump the chief thinkers of his day?" My heart leaped. I went straight to the library after class, knowing almost nothing of Edwards, and checked out his *Essay on the Trinity*. That's what I read first. Then I bought a stapled photocopy of *The End for Which God Created the World* at the bookstore.

Meanwhile, my exegesis and systematic theology classes were undoing my Arminian presuppositions with biblical facts. By the end of three years, not only was I a romantic rationalist, but the romance and the rational labor were now firmly focused on the Word of God. An absolutely sovereign God of grace was at the center. He had planned the death of his Son for my salvation before the world was made. And if the worst and best things were planned, all was planned. He "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

All of this was being forged while I was teaching Sunday school, and while I was falling in love with the church under Ray Ortlund's shepherding, and while I was hearing Ralph Winter describe the explosive new realities of missions around the world. Nothing about my emerging theology felt artificial or academic or detached or irrelevant to life. It all felt real and personal and relevant for church and home and the culture and all the nations of the world.

But what to do with my life? The advice I got was, if you have the energy and a wife who's willing, go ahead and get your final degree (a doctorate), and then all the doors will be open to you. So, after I was rejected at Princeton and

accepted by Leonhard Goppelt at the University of Munich, we headed for Germany in July 1971.

Doctoral Studies at the University of Munich

What I saw in the theological educational system and state-church life in Germany confirmed most of what I did not want to become. Here were world-class scholars, whom everyone on the cutting edge in America were oohing and ahing over, teaching in a way that was exegetically non-transferable, insubordinate toward the Scriptures, and indifferent to the life of the church. I attended university classes where nineteen-year-old ministerial students were soaked in every form of faddish criticism, while the tools for mining the gold of Scripture were untouched and the taste buds for enjoying its honey were unawakened.

I recall one appalling illustration of the fruit of this folly. I attended an ordination service where most of the people in the church were older women. The visiting church official stood and announced his text from "Q." I kid you not. If you don't know, "Q" is the scholarly name given to a hypothetical document containing the parts of Matthew and Luke not shared by Mark. I was not impressed with the theological and academic life in Germany in those days.

I wrote my dissertation on Jesus's love command⁸ and worshiped in a lively Baptist church and led a small discipleship group every Friday night, and stoked the fires of my faith with Jonathan Edwards and God's Word. But the exegetical methods I saw in Germany could not come close to the theological and methodological goldmine that I had

found in seminary. I used my Fuller-taught method of observation and analysis to research and write an acceptable dissertation, and then left Germany as quickly as I could. I did not have to work hard to protect myself from this system. I saw it up close, and from the inside, and found early on that this global king of biblical scholarship had no clothes on.⁹

I was disillusioned with such scholarship. It seemed driven by the need for peer approval. It used technical jargon that only insiders could understand and that often concealed ambiguity. It put enormous weight on speculative methodologies (*Formgeschichte*, *Traditionsgeschichte*, and *Redaktionsgeschichte*, and *Sachkritik*) that gave rise to scholarly articles which began in the mode of *Wahrscheinlichkeit* (probability) and by the end had been transformed into the mode of *Sicherheit* (certainty) by waving the wand of scholarly consensus.

There was the use of linguistic skills to create vagueness and conceal superficiality. Few, it seemed to me, would press the real question of meaning until it yielded the riches of theological truth. The whole enterprise lacked the aroma of heaven or the odor of hell, and there did not seem to be any burden for the lostness of the world.

Exultation over anything glorious was not allowed into their explanations—which meant that the greatest realities were left unexplained, because there are realities that are so great they can only be illumined in the light of exultation. By and large, there seemed to be little apprehension of the incoherence between the infinite value of the object of the study and the naturalistic nature of their study. The whole atmosphere seemed unplugged from the majesty of the object.

I earned my doctorate. They mailed it to me a few months after I left. I took it out of the mailing tube in the fall of 1974 to see if it was real. I put it back in and have not looked at it since. It's still in the tube in a bottom drawer at home (I think), and no one has ever asked to see it. But, by God's grace, it did get me my first job.

Bethel College

I had a wife and child and needed a job. I wrote to about thirty churches, denominations, missions, colleges, and seminaries. One door opened in the fall of 1974 for a one-year sabbatical replacement teaching New Testament at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota. Thank you, Walt Wessel. I took the job and have been in Minnesota ever since.

The one-year sabbatical replacement turned into six happy years teaching New Testament book studies and Greek and New Testament introduction. I thought this was my calling. Be a teacher and a scholar. So I set about to publish my dissertation in the *SNTS Monograph Series*, and I wrote a handful of articles in scholarly journals. These were heady days as I stretched my academic wings. I loved the writing. I loved the teaching.

But gradually things began to change inside of me. God was stirring. I knew I would never be a great scholar. I simply could not read fast enough. I could take a small issue or an article or book and apply the severe discipline of analysis and criticism. But I could not be comprehensive. I could not read all that was written on anything.

Moreover, I was teaching in college, not seminary, and

so the trickledown effect of my teaching for the good of the church had farther to go than if I had been teaching seminary students. That felt frustrating.

I became very restless with the work of grading papers and teaching such a limited slice of the pie of humanity: middle-class, mainly white eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds. All the while, I was hearing good preaching on Sunday and feeling a fire inside: *Oh, Lord, I would love to do that.* And if I heard a bad sermon, I would feel, *Oh, Lord, we've got to do better than that.*

Then came the sabbatical of May through December 1979. I wrote the book *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*. While I was living and breathing the air of Romans 9 for eight months, the Lord spoke to me very powerfully through the words of that chapter. He said, in effect, “I, the God of Romans 9, will be *proclaimed* and not just analyzed or explained.” By the end of that sabbatical, the battle was over, and I had resolved to leave teaching and seek a pastoral position.

I longed to see the Word of God applied in preaching to the whole range of ages and life situations. I wanted to watch the absolutely sovereign God of Romans 9 build his church. I wanted to see what would happen if the supremacy of God in all things was made the centerpiece of a local church through the Word of God.

I knew what this would mean to leave the world of academia. It would mean no more summers free to read and study and write; endless administrative pressures and

challenges; an uncontrollable schedule; an audience who would not want or reward academic prowess but pastoral warmth and presence; funerals and weddings and baptisms and counseling and hospital visitation and emergencies and conflict resolution and staff management; relentless pressure to write a sermon or two or three every week; and that the days of publishing articles in *NTS* and *Scottish Journal of Theology* and *Theologische Zeitschrift*—the days of being on the cutting edge of any scholarly discipline—were over.

But knowing all that, I could not resist any longer. The passion to preach and to see God shape and grow a church by the Word of God was overwhelming.

Bethlehem Baptist Church

So I was called to Bethlehem Baptist and began in June 1980. I was thirty-four years old, married with three children. The church was 110 years old, and there were three hundred older people and almost no youth. What I have done is try to preach the whole counsel of God from his written Word, with a passion for Jesus and a love for my people. I have tried to structure things so that the people are cared for in their needs and so that they learn to care for each other and reach out to the lost.

The impulses from my high school days and from Wheaton are very much alive. I am a (very slow) reader, a thinker, a feeler, a writer, a lover of poetic power, and, I hope, in all these ways, a loyal shepherd who does not forsake the sheep when the enemy comes. I have written all my sermons in manuscript form (with very few exceptions), and I try to

write them with manifest rooting in the text of Scripture, with clear thinking, with strong feeling, and with imaginative surprise.

Part Two: The Scholarly Roots of Christ-Exalting Joy

It may well be asked, in what way have these thirty years of pastoral life been the work of a pastor-scholar? Let me try to answer like this—so that it has the broadest relevance and usefulness to others. At the heart of my ministry has been the conviction (which I have called *Christian Hedonism*) that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*.

It Is Not New

This summary statement has been the overarching theme of my life and ministry. It is the trumpet call sounding through all I say. It is not new. All I did was make it rhyme. And I'm probably not the first to do that. Jonathan Edwards said, "God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being *rejoiced in*."¹⁰ That is what I am trying to say for our day: *the glory of God is magnified when we rejoice in him*.

C. S. Lewis says exactly the same thing even more clearly. In his book on the Psalms, he writes:

The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is "to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." But we shall then know that these are the same thing. *Fully to enjoy is to glorify*. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy him.¹¹

The implications of this for ministry are all-pervasive. I have tried to spell them out in most of my books. That is the main reason I write—to spread this conviction and this experience.

Fresh Old Language

One way the pastoral team at Bethlehem has tried to keep this issue central in all our ministry has been to develop the vocabulary of *treasuring*. *Treasure* is a wonderfully helpful word because it is both a noun and a verb in English—as it is in Greek (*thesaurus* and *thesaurizo*). God is infinitely valuable as the greatest treasure of the universe. If you find the kingdom of God, Jesus says, it is like finding a treasure hidden in a field (Matt. 13:44). Our calling in life is to manifest the greatness of the value of that treasure. The way we do it is by *treasuring* the Treasure above all things. Jesus said, "*In his joy* he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matt. 13:44). This joy—as we lose what the world has to have—is the baffling way of life that would make the world ask, "Where's your hope?" (see 1 Pet. 3:15).

In other words, at the heart of *magnifying* God's worth is *feeling* God's worth. Treasuring the Treasure. Enjoying the glory. Admiring the greatness. Savoring the feast. All this is the necessary precursor to behavior that glorifies God. If you try to do deeds "for the glory of God" without *treasuring* the glory of God in your heart, it is a sham. The word *hypocrisy* was created precisely for the effort to say with deeds what we do not feel in our hearts.

Nonchipper, Blood-Earner Joy

So my ministry is driven by the effort to abolish this hypocrisy. It focuses on the glory of God and the joy of the soul. And, of course, this joy cries a lot. There is nothing chipper about it. We do not live in a chipper world, and Jesus did not accomplish a chipper salvation in a chipper way. Everything is blood-earner, even our play. Even our belly laughter that lasts so long it makes our eyes red. Paul's phrase "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10) is the banner that flies over the house of Christian hedonism.

The flavor of our God-glorifying joy in God tastes like this:

All gracious affections that are a sweet [aroma] to Christ, and that fill the soul of a Christian with a heavenly sweetness and fragrantcy, are brokenhearted affections. A truly Christian love, either to God or men, is a humble brokenhearted love. The desires of the saints, however earnest, are humble desires: their hope is a humble hope; and *their joy, even when it is unspeakable, and full of glory, is a humble brokenhearted joy*, and leaves the Christian more poor in spirit, and more like a little child, and more disposed to a universal lowliness of behavior.¹²

So for thirty years I have tried, with much imperfection and manifold failures, to live up to my own message, to penetrate the heart and awaken the kind of affections for God that would accord with his glory, and create lives that would make him look great. This has been based on the conviction that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*.

The Downside of the Scholarly Bent

Now, how does this relate to the pastor as scholar? On the one hand, its first effect is to protect the church from the dangers of a scholarly bent. Many pastors, especially those who love the glorious vision of God's being and beauty and plan of salvation, have a scholarly bent that threatens to over-intellectualize the Christian faith, which means they turn it mainly into a system to be thought about rather than a way of life to be felt and lived. Of course, it *is* a system as well as a life. But the danger is that the whole thing can be made to feel academic rather than heart-wrenchingly real. That's what Christian hedonism helps us to avoid.

Where the faith is over-intellectualized, many ordinary, authentic saints can smell the error. Rightly, they start drifting away, but sadly, often into the worst extremes of emotionalism. But if Christian hedonism is alive—that is, if true joy in God is alive for the glory of God—I have found that many starving saints make their way home to a place where head and heart are more in balance, and the reality and power of the Holy Spirit are craved and cherished.

But this also assumes something about the head as well as the heart. If head and heart are to be in biblical balance, what is the function of the head in Christian hedonism? This is where the pastor as scholar begins to take on relevance.

The Link between Christ-Exalting Joy and Scholarly Effort

The question here is how the life of the mind relates to treasuring Christ—how thinking relates to joy in God. I would

state it like this: *Right thinking about God exists to serve right feelings for God.* Logic exists for the sake of love. Reasoning exists for the sake of rejoicing. Doctrine exists for the sake of delight. Reflection about God exists for the sake of affection for God. The head is meant to serve the heart.

So knowing truth is the proper means to admiring truth. Both thinking and feeling are indispensable. But they are not both ultimate. Thinking exists to serve admiring. Thinking is meant to serve worship and delight and satisfaction in God.

The Devil himself has many right thoughts about God. My guess is that the Devil, on some doctrines, is more orthodox than us—more correct than we are. But none of these doctrines, in the mind of the Devil, gives rise to any love for God, any worship of God, any delight in God. The Devil believes that Jesus died for sinners. The Devil believes that Jesus rose from the dead. The Devil believes that Jesus is coming back. And the Devil hates him! So knowing right things about Jesus doesn't automatically produce right affections. But knowing those right things about Christ is essential for having right affections for God.

What I am getting at is that Christ-exalting joy depends on right thinking about God. If God is going to be glorified in our being satisfied in him, then our satisfaction in him must be based on truth. And truth is what we find by the right use of the mind—by scholarly effort.

Gladness without Grounds Does Not Glorify

Let me try to illustrate why it is that a well-founded, well-reasoned delight honors Jesus. Suppose that you are walking

down a street and a total stranger comes up to you and gives you a bag with \$10,000 in it and asks you to deposit that money in his bank account and gives you his bank account number and his Social Security number and all his passwords. And suppose you don't know this man at all.

You ask him, "Who are you and why are you trusting me with \$10,000 in cash to deposit in your bank account? Why don't you think I will steal it?"

And he says, "I don't have any reason at all for trusting you. I just feel this warm feeling in my heart that you are a trustworthy person."

Now the question is, do you feel honored by that warm feeling in his heart? No. You don't feel honored. He's crazy! He's irrational! He has no reason to trust you. He doesn't know you. He is not using his mind. He is not being a good "scholar." We are not honored by good, deep feelings toward us if they don't have any basis.

But, suppose when you ask him, "Why are you trusting me?" he says, "You don't know me, but I have been watching you at work for over a year, learning about your character. I know you very well, and I have found you to be a reliable person. Therefore, I have a joyful confidence that you will not steal my money. You are a person of character, and I have reasons for believing that."

Now, do you feel honored by the joyful feeling in that man's heart? Yes, you do. Because his emotions toward you are well-grounded. These joyful feelings of confidence and trust have reasons. They are an honor to you. They glorify you. The stranger has used his mind well—he has been a

good “scholar”—and that rational effort has produced a joy in your character and trust in your reliability. This joy honors you. You are *glorified*, so to speak, in his being satisfied in you.

So, when I say that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*, I am referring to a well-grounded satisfaction. I see real things in Jesus and in God the Father; I see real reasons for being satisfied in him. And therefore my emotions are truly an honor to him because they are based on real reasons.

So the mind is supposed to be engaged in seeing reality for what it is, and awakening the heart to love God for all that he is. If I were to claim the role of pastor-scholar, this is what I would mean by it. Think rightly and deeply about the Word and the world with a view to seeing the greatness of God and his works (especially the work of Christ) so that the affections of our hearts might rest on a true foundation and God might be honored by how we feel toward him and by the behaviors that flow from this heart.

The Biblical Basis for the Scholarly Service of Joy

What I would like to do in the rest of this chapter is show from the Scriptures that God’s purpose for right thinking (scholarship) is to awaken and sustain satisfaction in God that glorifies him. There are at least nine pointers in Scripture to this conviction.

1) Zeal according to Knowledge

Consider the first two verses of Romans 10: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” Here is a group of people that have a zeal for God, and it is doing them no good at all! They’re not even saved! We know that they’re not saved, because in verse 1 the apostle Paul is praying for their salvation.

So clearly, the problem is, according to verse 2, that their zeal does not accord with knowledge. So even though Christian hedonism puts a huge weight on zeal (passion) for God, now we can see how worthless that zeal is if it’s not based on true knowledge. So the use of the mind to come to true knowledge is necessary so that our satisfaction in God will be an honor to him.

2) Understanding in and through Thinking

Next consider 2 Timothy 2:7. Paul says to his young disciple Timothy, “Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” Understanding is a gift of God. There it is in the second half of verse 7: “The Lord will *give* you understanding in everything.” Many people believe that. And they think that the understanding will be given to them without thinking. But that’s the opposite of what Paul says!

Did you notice the word “for” at the beginning of the second half of the verse? “. . . *for* the Lord will give you understanding.” In other words, *because* God gives under-

standing, *therefore* think over what Paul says! Don't say, "Because God gives understanding, I don't need to think." And don't say, "Because I'm thinking, God doesn't need to give it to me; I can get it on my own." It's *both-and*, not *either-or*.

Think over what the apostle says *because* in and through your thinking, God gives understanding. So when I am preparing a sermon, I open my Bible, or I turn on my computer Bible program, and I begin to think about the words, conjunctions, and phrases and the order of the propositions.

Every few minutes, I pause and I say, *Oh God, open my eyes, grant me light! Grant me to see what is really here! I know that I am dependent on the Holy Spirit to see the truth that is really here.* But that does not stop me from thinking! Because Paul says, "Think over what I say." Thinking hard about biblical truth is the means through which the Holy Spirit opens us to the truth.

3) Life Given through Reasoning

Now we turn to Acts 17. The apostle Paul repeatedly entered into the synagogue in order to persuade Jews to become Christians. Now, how did he do that? Acts 17:2-3 says, "Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.'"

Paul knows that these unbelievers are blind and deaf

and dead in their trespasses and sins. So you might wonder, well, if all these people are blind and deaf and dead, why is he arguing with them? So the question is, if Paul believes that these unbelievers are blind—spiritually blind—and deaf and dead, why would he even talk to them?

The answer is that God has ordained to use means to give life. He has designed that life would be given, and truth would be imparted, through Paul's reasoning. Paul knows that, according to 1 Peter 1:23, we are born again through the message of God in the gospel. And so the new birth is a supernatural Holy-Spirit-caused miracle. But God does it through reasoning over the gospel.

Do you recall what Luke said about how Lydia, in Acts 16, was saved? Paul finds a group of women beside a river, and he shares the gospel with them. He reasons with them from his mind and his mouth. And Lydia is listening, with her mind, to a rational presentation of the gospel. And Luke says, "The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said." So we must have both—*both* Paul's mind imparting the gospel in understandable words to Lydia's mind *and* the Holy Spirit opening Lydia's heart to receive it. There would be no joy or hope that glorifies Jesus if there were no work of the mind in Paul and Lydia.

4) Jesus Assuming Logic

We go now to Luke 12. My point here is that Jesus assumes that human beings use logic, and he holds them accountable to use their logic well. Sometimes I have been told that Aristotelian-like logic is Western and Greek, not Hebraic or

biblical, and therefore doesn't belong in the presentation of the gospel.

Let me explain briefly what I mean by Aristotelian-like logic. We all know what a syllogism is. Premise number one: *All men are mortal*. Premise number two: *Plato is a man*. Conclusion: *Plato is mortal*. That's a syllogism. Aristotle is famous for noting this. And, I believe, it came from God.

Now, you have to decide: does God hold you accountable to think clearly like that? Would God be pleased if you used a syllogism like this: *Cows have four legs. My dog has four legs. Therefore, my dog is a cow*. I don't think God would be pleased if you really thought that way. That's bad logic. It's the sort of logic thugs use to put you in a dictator's jail, and it gives you no recourse to "reason." Might makes right when logic is relativized.

Now, of course, you should care little about my opinion about logic. But you should care a lot about what Jesus thinks about logic. So listen carefully to Luke 12:54–57:

[Jesus] . . . said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? And why do you not judge [that is, use your minds] for yourselves what is right?"

Notice the syllogism implied in verse 55. Jesus is saying to these people, you are really good at using your minds

when it comes to matters like weather. So here's the syllogism. Premise number one: *It always gets hot when a south wind blows*. Premise number two: *A south wind is blowing*. Conclusion: *It will be hot today*. Now that is Aristotelian-like logic, which I believe, rightly construed, is straight out of the mind of God and confirmed by the example of Jesus and Jesus's holding these people accountable to use it well.

What do you think he means in verse 57? "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?" Your minds are so effective when they're dealing in natural things! But when your minds are applied to spiritual things, you don't think clearly at all! It would be like contemporary secular people being able to do amazing scientific things—create medicines, create computers, put people in space. Secular man, without the gospel, uses his mind in amazing ways. I think Jesus would say to a university-educated secular person, "Why do you not use your brilliant mind to understand and know me?" That's what the mind is for—to know the truth and to awaken affections for God that correspond to his greatness.

5) A Use of the Mind That Jesus Hates

Now consider Matthew 21:23–27. There is a use of the mind that Jesus hates. And I want you to ask as we look at this paragraph, *What are these people doing with their minds that Jesus abominates?*

And when he entered the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came up to him as he was teaching, and said, "By what authority are you doing

these things, and who gave you this authority?" Jesus answered them, "I also will ask you one question, and if you tell me the answer, then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?" And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Why then did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From man,' we are afraid of the crowd, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We do not know." And he said to them, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things."

What are they doing with their minds? These are very bright people. And they say, "Well, if we give him this answer, we're trapped because we didn't believe. But if we give him the other answer, we're also trapped because the people are going to be angry with us. So how can we get out of the trap? Let's use our minds to get out of the trap. Here's a good way to get out of the trap. We will say, *We don't know.*"

Frankly, that behavior makes me angry. We are surrounded in America by people like that. Instead of using their minds to come to strong convictions and let the chips fall where they will and suffer for what's true, they are repeatedly angling to get out of traps. Don't be like this, if for no other reason than because it is bad scholarship! If your mind, in studying the truth, leads you to a conviction that will get you into trouble, believe it! Speak it! There are so many pastors who conceal their convictions from their people because they are afraid of conflict.

Here's one verse that is the exact opposite of the way

these people use their minds—2 Corinthians 4:2: "But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." That is a beautiful description of a godly pastor. I want to be that kind of preacher. I want to stand before God on the last day and say, I tried to be faithful and let people think of me what they wanted to think. I don't want to be the kind of pastor who's always watching what people are going to say and then governing what comes out of his mouth by what the people are going to say.

So good scholarship—good use of the mind in seeking and finding truth—stands in the service of honest, courageous ministry. And the goal of that ministry, whether it succeeds or not, is to put people's souls on a solid footing. The aim is that great affections for God would be awakened by clearly seen and courageously spoken truth.

6) Paul's Rhetorical Question

Thirteen times in Paul's letters, he uses the rhetorical question, "Do you not know?" Let me just give you a few examples. Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit? (1 Cor. 6:19). Do you not know that we will judge angels? (1 Cor. 6:2). Do you not know that when you lie with a prostitute, you become one body with her? (1 Cor. 6:15). Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (1 Cor. 5:6). Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom? (1 Cor. 6:9). Do

you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? (1 Cor. 6:15).

Thirteen times Paul uses that question. What is he thinking when he does that? He's thinking, "If you *knew*, you would be acting differently! If you *knew* these things, your hearts would be different!" He is writing his letters to help them have the kind of *knowledge* that will change their lives. This is the way we transform our churches. We don't manipulate them and coerce them into trying to act certain ways. We seek to awaken affections in the heart, for out of the heart the mouth speaks and the body acts.

My wife and I visited a church in North Carolina once while we were on vacation. My wife, who is very tolerant, left the church saying, "I don't think we will ever go back there." That's pretty verbal for her. The preacher had spent his whole sermon hammering on his people to come to the midweek meetings on Wednesday nights! And hammering on them to give money!

We sat there thinking, *This isn't working*. We just wanted to go away. And the people *were* going away. And the only thing he knew to do to help them not go away was to tell them, *Don't go away! Going away is not right!* Which is not what Paul did. Paul said, "*Don't you know* that it is more blessed to give than to receive? I want you to know the joy of giving. I love you. I want you to know the blessing."

Don't try to manipulate people. Don't try to coerce people and make them do things. It has to come from inside, from their hearts. And that means they need knowledge that awakens love. People's affections are changed

by what they know. Knowledge itself is, of course, not sufficient, as we have seen (the Devil has plenty). But it is necessary. The Holy Spirit uses it to awaken new desires and new wonders and joys. That is how God is exalted in changed behaviors.

7) Pastors Able to Teach

The Bible tells us in Ephesians 4:11 that Jesus has given to his church pastors and teachers. And it tells us that these pastors and teachers should be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). They should be good teachers. So all of us pastors should be thinking, God is giving me as a gift to my church. And he is telling me, *The way you will be a gift to your church is if you are an effective teacher*.

I think that implies that ordinary folks in the pew need help understanding their Bible. If the sheep did not need help understanding their Bibles, God would not have given shepherds who had to be apt to teach. The shepherds would just read the Bible on Sunday morning, and the people would see and feel all they need to. No teaching or preaching required. But that's not how Jesus set it up.

So the pastor's job is to look at the Bible and work hard to understand what's in it, and then work hard to make it understandable and attractive and compelling to our people. The story in Luke 24:32 should ignite in every pastor a passion for Bible exposition that captures the mind of his people and makes their hearts burn. The men on the Emmaus road said, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, *while he opened to us the Scriptures?*" A few

months ago when I read that, I wrote in my journal, "O God, make me that kind of teacher. I want the hearts of my people to burn as I open to them the Scriptures."

That's what thinking and understanding and teaching (scholarship) are for: burning hearts for God.

8) Mental Effort Needed for the Whole Counsel of God

There is a phrase in Acts 20:27 that is very important in this regard. Paul says, speaking to the elders of Ephesus, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Now, what is this "whole counsel of God"? We don't have the space here to work out all of that, but one implication is clear: in order to give to our people the whole counsel of God, it takes tremendous mental effort to find it in the Bible.

In one sense, the Bible itself is the whole counsel of God. But that's not what Paul meant here. This is too big. He didn't just read the whole Bible to them. He taught them from the Bible (Acts 19:9). There must be a faithful way to sum this up in what's called a coherent and unified whole counsel of God. And my point is, it takes mental work to find what that is and to work it out in understandable, sharable ways.

We don't read through our Bibles once or twice or ten times and suddenly know the whole counsel of God. We have to ask hard questions about how the different parts of revelation fit together. That's called "scholarship." It doesn't have to be in school. It just has to be careful and honest and

observant and synthesizing and constructive. It's head work. And it's meant to serve the heart of our people.

I think this is why in 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul calls the expositor "a *worker* who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." A "worker." It takes hard mental *work* to rightly handle the Word of God. Don't let anybody ever tell you that hard mental work is unspiritual. We are using our minds to understand God's Word, and we are depending in prayer upon the Holy Spirit to guide our minds.

9) The Hard Mental Work of Book Reading

The Bible is a book. Jesus came in the flesh and was called the Word of God. He taught many things, and he did many things. He died for sins, and he rose again. He founded the church and poured out the Holy Spirit. All that foundational speaking and doing is preserved in a book. My ninth point is simply this: reading a substantial book well is hard mental work.

You learned your native language when you were very young—before you were five years old. You didn't know you were working when you did it. And so most of us assume that reading just comes naturally. But there is more than one kind of reading. One kind is passive and involves very little aggressive effort to understand. We just take what comes and let it happen to us.

But there is another kind of reading that is very active, and digs down into the author's mind, and wants to understand everything it sees. It may sound strange to say it, but

one of the most scholarly things I ever learned was that many parts of the Bible (like Paul's letters and Jesus's sermons) are less like strings of pearls and more like chains of steel. That is, the authors don't just give a sequence of spiritual gems; they forge a chain of logical argumentation. Their statements hang together. They are linked. One connects to another, and those two connect to another, and those three to another, and so on as the unbreakable argument of glorious truth extends through a passage. And, when the Holy Spirit enlightens our minds, this chain of argumentation is on fire.

Rigorous reading—scholarly reading—traces these lines of argumentation. Consider Romans 1:15–21. I have reproduced this passage with each proposition on a separate line along with the verse numbers to the left. Each proposition begins with a logical connector (“for,” “that is,” “as,” “because,” “ever since”), which appears in bold type. These small words are among the most important in the Bible. They tell us how the statements are related to each other.

For example, verse 16b gives us the *reason* that Paul is not ashamed of the gospel (16a)—namely, because it is the power of God for salvation. Verse 19a gives us the reason that God's wrath is justly revealed against *all* ungodliness everywhere in the world, even among peoples who have not access to the Bible (v. 18)—namely, because what they need to know to be held accountable is plain to them. And verses 19b–20b tell us why it is plain to them—namely, because God has revealed it in the things he made.

15 I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel,

16b for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,

16c [that is] to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

17a For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith,

17b as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

19a For what can be known about God is plain to them,

19b because God has shown it to them.

20a For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived,

20b ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.

20c So they are without excuse.

21a For although they knew God,

21b they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,

21c but they became futile in their thinking,

21d and their foolish hearts were darkened.

On and on the chain of argumentation grows. Words become statements, and statements are linked to form larger units. And these larger units are linked to build the whole book of Romans. The point here is simply this: since much of the Bible is written this way, pastors are called to trace these arguments with active, careful, rigorous reading, and explain statements and the connections and the larger units to their people, and then apply them to their lives. This kind of reading is exceedingly demanding, and it is a large part of what I would call “scholarship.”

All this is involved in the fact that God revealed himself to the church through the centuries in a book. He did not have to give the church a book. He could have done it another way. He could have just given daily dreams to his people. He could have caused dramatizations to appear in the sky. He could have communicated to a select few with secret knowledge and made them memorize everything and pass it on to another select few in each generation. He could have communicated to us any way he wanted to. And he did it in a book.

This is one reason that everywhere the Christian church has spread, there have been not only churches and hospitals, but also schools—places of rudimentary and then advanced scholarship. It's because we're dependent on a book. Since our faith is rooted in the understanding of a book, we want people to learn how to read, and then to have the Bible in their language, and to learn how to think carefully and doctrinally about the book.

So the very existence of the Bible as a book signals that the pastor is called to read carefully and accurately and thoroughly and honestly. That is, he is called to be a "scholar."

Summing Up

One way to make sense of this chapter is to say that its two parts reflect the two things that were happening to me in the first thirty-four years of my life—on the way to the pastorate. That story is the story of the emergence of a pastor with a desperate desire for joy in God and a rational bent that makes him less useful in many settings, and more useful in a few. Then the second half of the chapter is the fleshing out of those two traits—joy and thinking.

It seems to me, from my very biased and finite perspective, that what God was doing in my whole life was preparing me to see, and think about, and savor, and proclaim the truth that *God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him*. The first half of the chapter describes the emergence of a sinful soul who thinks and feels deeply and loves to speak and write about it. The second half of the chapter describes how the thinking serves the feeling in the ministry of the Word.

If I am scholarly, it is not in any sense because I try to stay on the cutting edge in the discipline of biblical and theological studies. I am far too limited for that. What "scholarly" would mean for me is that the greatest object of knowledge is God and that he has revealed himself authoritatively in a book; and that I should work with all my might and all my heart and all my soul and all my mind to know and enjoy him and to make him known for the joy of others.

Surely this is the goal of every pastor.