

# A READING LIST FOR THEOLOGICAL FORMATION

Compiled by Bob Thune, December 2006 (updated April 2009)

*“[An elder] must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9).*

One of the foremost biblical requirements for spiritual leadership is a deep knowledge of doctrine and theology. This means not only biblical literacy, but also holding to “the trustworthy message as it has been taught” (implying a familiarity with history) and “[refuting] those who oppose [sound doctrine]” (implying an ability to recognize and confront heresies and unhealthy teachings). This sort of mature theological understanding only comes through patient and diligent study.

The question for most men who aspire to spiritual leadership is: where do I start? Libraries are brimming with theological books. Seminaries are plenteous, each one offering its own unique flavor of spiritual formation. It seems that one could spend a lifetime digesting the information that’s available.

Some helpful pastors have put together reading lists to give students somewhere to begin. But the problem with most of these reading lists – and even with most seminary curriculums – is that they are not progressive in nature. They don’t help you start with the basics and work from there. After taking all my seminary classes backward (who needs prerequisites?), I have learned the hard way that good education requires a building-block approach. Below is my attempt to construct such a framework.

I suggest building your theology in 8 stages, outlined below. The books listed are by no means the only ones – and they may not even be the best ones. They are simply *the best ones that I have been exposed to*. With apologies to the thousands of capable authors I have left out, I have found the volumes on this list to be reliable guides. Titles in bold are the non-negotiables; the others are helpful for added competence.

Oh – and the underlying assumption is that you are reading and studying your Bible. That, of course, is the most important book, and without a deep knowledge of *it*, all the books on this list are insignificant.

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**I. Systematic Theology.** The starting point in theological formation is to get familiar with basic theological categories. A spiritual leader must be familiar with theological language and comfortably conversant in areas of basic doctrine.

- ***Systematic Theology, Wayne Grudem***
- ***Westminster Confession of Faith***
- ***Heidelberg Catechism***
- *Bible Doctrine, Wayne Grudem (a simplified version of Systematic Theology)*
- *Christian Theology, Millard Erickson*

**II. Church History and Historical Theology.** Once basic categories are formed, a mature spiritual leader must have a basic grasp of the history of thought. He must understand how we have gotten to where we are, intellectually speaking. He must be familiar with major thinkers and important schools of thought.

- ***Church History in Plain Language*, Bruce Shelley**
- ***The Consequences of Ideas: Understanding the Concepts that Shaped Our World*, R. C. Sproul** (a basic introduction to philosophy)
- ***Historical Theology: An Introduction to The History of Christian Thought*, Alister McGrath.** (An overview of the history of theology, broken into 4 major periods: Patristic, Middle Ages, Reformation, and Modern. Introduces the reader to major figures in the history of theology. Approx. 400 pages.)
- ***Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Richard Lovelace**
- ***Turning Points*, Mark Noll** (highlights the 10 major events in church history)
- ***The Story of Christianity*, Justo Gonzalez** (2 Volumes)
- ***The Christian Theology Reader*, Alister McGrath.** (Contains short excerpts (3-4 pages each) from the writings of the world's great theologians, with intro and comments from McGrath. Approx. 700 pages. Introduces the reader to almost every major figure in the history of Christian theology.)
- ***Revival & Revivalism*, Iain Murray** (helpful for understanding the current state of the American Church)

**III. Biblical Epistemology.** Epistemology is a big word for “how we know things.” Every godly Christian leader needs a biblical paradigm for thinking – a “grid” through which to assimilate information. The resources below are foundational for shaping a comprehensive biblical philosophy of life and ministry.

- ***Perspectives on the Word of God*, John Frame** (booklet)
- ***The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Lesslie Newbigin**
- ***Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, John Frame** (scholarly and comprehensive, but perhaps the most important book on this entire list)
- ***Gospel Christianity*, Tim Keller** (small-group study)
- **“The Transforming Power of the Gospel,” Steve Childers** (article)
- **“How to Disciple a Transsexual,” Bob Thune** (article)
- ***Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*, C. John Miller**
- ***God's Passion for His Glory*, John Piper/Jonathan Edwards**

**IV. Reformed Theology.** Coram Deo is expressly Reformed (Calvinistic) in its doctrinal convictions. We take this position because the Bible clearly teaches it. At some point in the theological formation of a leader, he must begin to wrestle through these issues biblically and shape his theology accordingly.

- ***Introduction to John Owen's The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, J.I. Packer** (available as a PDF file from Bob)

- ***Chosen By God*, RC Sproul**
- ***The Canons of Dort***
- ***The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin**
- ***Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*, JI Packer**
- ***The Pleasures of God*, John Piper**
- ***The Justification of God*, John Piper (an academically rigorous exegesis of Romans 9)**

**V. Apologetics.** “Refuting those who contradict” means understanding the Christian worldview as well as those worldviews which oppose it. Maturity in Christian apologetics comes in three stages.

1. You need to be convinced of the soundness of your own worldview and be able to articulate your own reasons for believing (defensive apologetics)
  - ***Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis**
  - ***The Reason for God*, Timothy Keller**
  - ***Simply Christian*, NT Wright**
  - ***A General Introduction to the Bible*, Norman Geisler and William Nix**
  - ***The Journey: A Spiritual Roadmap for Modern Pilgrims*, Peter Kreeft**
  - ***Jesus Under Fire*, J.P. Moreland (Editor)**
2. You need to be able to critique other worldviews and cultural idols (offensive apologetics)
  - ***The Universe Next Door*, James W. Sire**
  - ***The God Who Is There*, Francis Schaeffer**
  - ***How Should We Then Live*, Francis Schaeffer**
3. You need to understand apologetic method and how to DO apologetics
  - ***Every Thought Captive*, Richard Pratt**
  - ***Apologetics to the Glory of God*, John Frame**
  - ***Classical Apologetics*, RC Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley**
  - ***Proper Confidence*, Leslie Newbigin**
  - ***The Defense of the Faith*, Cornelius Van Til**

**VI. Church Leadership.** For those men who would pursue eldership, a basic understanding of ecclesiology, preaching, and missional church planting is essential. For those who are simply pursuing their own theological development, these books will make you a good church member.

- ***Radical Reformation*, Mark Driscoll**
- ***Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch** (available as a full-length text and as an abridged booklet)
- ***A Book You’ll Actually Read on Church Leadership*, Mark Driscoll**
- ***The Church*, Edmund Clowney**
- ***Christ Centered Preaching*, Bryan Chapell**
- **Selected Resources on Church Planting** (packet compiled by Bob Thune)
- Acts 29 bootcamp (attend)

**VII. Spiritual Formation and Pastoral Theology.** Of course, spiritual maturity is not just about knowledge and facts and doctrine. It's also about prayer and spirituality and shepherding people. These things are harder to write about, because they're experiential and intuitive. But thankfully, God has gifted a few authors to write lucidly about these matters.

- ***How People Change*, Timothy Lane and Paul David Tripp**
- ***The Contemplative Pastor*, Eugene Peterson**
- ***Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard**
- *Skillful Shepherds*, Derek Tidball
- *Brothers, We are not Professionals*, John Piper
- *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster
- *Christ Plays in 10,000 Places*, Eugene Peterson
- *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola
- *The Pursuit of God*, AW Tozer

**VIII. Major Works.** The final (and ongoing) step of being a theologically mature Christian is reading and studying some of the great figures in Christian history. Every actor reads Shakespeare, every artist studies Rembrandt, every musician learns Bach and Handel. Likewise, every Christian, at some point in his or her life, should read the primary work of the major thinkers in Christian history.

- St. Augustine
  - *Confessions*
- Athanasius
  - *On the Incarnation*
- Thomas Aquinas
  - *A Shorter Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of Saint Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologica*, Peter Kreeft
- Martin Luther
  - *Introduction to Romans*
  - *Bondage of the Will*
  - *Lectures on Galatians*
- John Calvin
  - *Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- Jonathan Edwards
  - *Religious Affections*
  - *Freedom of the Will*
  - *God's Passion for His Glory* (John Piper's book which contains the full text of Edwards' *The End for Which God Created the World*)
- Blaise Pascal
  - *Pensees*
  - *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees*, Peter Kreeft

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES – BY TOPIC

### **Postmodernism/Pluralism**

- *Postmodern Times*, Gene Edward Veith
- *A Primer On Postmodernism*, Stanley Grenz
- *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas & Will Willimon
- *Bearing The Witness of the Spirit: Lesslie Newbigin's Theology of Cultural Plurality*, George Hunsberger
- *After Christendom*, Stanley Hauerwas (a sequel to Resident Aliens)

### **Missiology**

- *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Leslie Newbigin
- *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, George Hunsberger
- *The Missional Church*, Darrell Guder
- *The Tangible Kingdom*, Hugh Halter

### **Spiritual Disciplines**

- *Kingdom of Couches*, Will Walker
- *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard
- *Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard
- *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius of Loyola
- *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg

### **Prayer**

- *Pray With Your Eyes Open*, Richard Pratt
- *Don't Just Stand There, Pray Something*, Ronald Dunn
- *How to Pray*, RA Torrey
- *The God Who Hears*, W. Bingham Hunter
- *The Way of A Pilgrim*, Author Unknown
- *The Power of Christ's Prayer Life*, Charles Spurgeon
- *A Simple Way to Pray*, Martin Luther
- *The Ministry of Intercessory Prayer*, Andrew Murray

### **Christian Life**

- *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton
- *The Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards
- *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- *Pilgrims Progress*, John Bunyan
- *Desiring God*, John Piper
- *A Long Obedience In The Same Direction*, Eugene Peterson
- *Ordering Your Private World*, Gordon McDonald
- *Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices*, Thomas Brooks

**Pastoral Care**

- *The Contemplative Pastor*, Eugene Peterson
- *The Reformed Pastor*, Richard Baxter
- *Competent to Counsel*, Jay Adams

**Marriage & Family**

- *Shepherding A Child's Heart*, Ted Tripp
- *God, Marriage, and Family*, Andreas Kostenberger
- *Boundaries with Kids*, Henry Cloud & John Townsend
- *Bringing Up Boys*, James Dobson
- *Home By Choice*, Brenda Hunter (for women & mothers)
- *Fidelity*, Douglas Jones (for men)
- *Recovering Biblical Womanhood and Manhood*, Wayne Grudem and John Piper
- *Reforming Marriage*, Douglas Wilson