

What They Didn't Teach Me in My Formal Theological Education

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 December 2018

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Welcome back. Today's question is a follow-on from yesterday's question. It reads, You mentioned in a video about training that key parts of your theological knowledge or training, you had to work on yourself in your own time as they weren't addressed in the curriculum.

What were those key areas? Well, just about every single area of my theology was largely worked on in my own time. These aren't things that your theological training will give you, for the most part. It will challenge you to develop in a number of different areas, and it will give you the tools, the basic tools, with which to help you. But it can't take you very far. It doesn't have enough time to work with apart from anything else.

Unless you are willing to devote yourself wholeheartedly to it, it won't bring you very far. If you're just doing enough to keep up with your classes and attending those classes, you can coast through and you'll be completely unqualified to deal with theology.

You'll have a little knowledge, and that knowledge will be more of a liability than it will be a benefit. If, however, you use that time intensively and really make the most of the resources that are put at your disposal, make the most of the peer group that you're given, make the most of the mentors and examples that you're given in terms of your lecturers and other students, particularly PhD students.

[1 : 18] If you're a younger student, spend time with the PhD students and learn from them. That's one of the ways that I really found myself benefiting from theological education. Spending time with the students who were several years more advanced in their studies than I was, and learning how to think from them and having time with them that I wouldn't be able to have with some of the lecturers was very formative for me.

So find people just that stage up from you who will be able to push you a bit further. As for areas that were almost completely left off, liturgy. You won't get taught anything about liturgy in most university training in theology.

It just isn't there. There will be some training in the theology of the sacraments, for instance, and there will be some training in other areas that may be related, things like the use of the creed, things like that.

But there won't be much grounding in liturgy. And you'll find the same in many seminaries. It's an area that is largely missed out. It's one of the things that the Theopolis Institute is really aiming to do, to fill that gap.

And so we have a Theopolis Fellows Programme that, if you're interested in, I can tell you more about. But it is designed to plug some of that gap. Also, the gap in biblical theology.

[2 : 39] There are various courses in biblical theology, but often what you find is you're given the basic tools, the linguistic tools and a certain sense of the map of Scripture and how it fits together, some of the hermeneutical issues or tackle, things like that.

But in terms of a deep knowledge of the text, you won't get that. You'll have a very basic overview of the text, if you're lucky.

And you'll drill in on certain parts. You'll maybe do an extensive series on the Johannine literature or certain Pauline epistles. But in terms of a comprehensive knowledge of the Old and New Testaments and thinking about how those relate together, you are not going to get that in most theological education.

That, in part, is a fault of the education. But for the most part, it's just a factor of a result of its limits. It doesn't have much time to do all of this. This takes a considerable amount of personal devotion to

study.

You need to do this in your own time. It won't be done for you by an education. And so spend hours reading commentaries. Spend hours listening to talks on different books.

[3 : 48] Spend a great deal of time writing on these things. Without that, you just won't have that to the extent that you need it. In a typical theological training in a university, you won't be trained to speak about Scripture in a sermon setting, to address a congregation and exhort people from Scripture.

And so that connection between theory and exhortation is one that isn't significantly addressed. There is some of that, perhaps, in places, and you can take some courses that will help you on that in practical theology.

But for the most part, it won't prepare you for that. You'll get more of that in the seminary setting. But the seminary setting will often leave out some of the more academic, theoretical stuff. And so either of them is going to leave you weak on certain fronts.

And so you will need to fill those gaps yourself. You'll need to think about how to plug that gap. For me, one of the things that helped was setting up a preaching group with a number of students in St. Andrews.

And so we'd meet together every Sunday evening after our services, and we would just spend time every week. One person would preach, and there would be feedback. And that sort of thing makes a big difference.

[5 : 07] But you'll need to be enterprising. Do these things yourself. I found that mostly the things that have helped me, more than anything else, have been those things that I've done in my own time.

So, for instance, I listened through pretty much the complete works of James Jordan over a period of work. So about over a year or so it took me.

And he's got maybe about a thousand lectures of various types, and I listened to pretty much all of them. That takes time, and it takes quite a bit of discipline.

You're listening. In my position, I was listening to several hours a day, and I just drew in as much as I could from that time. I also preached regularly as a lay preacher.

I set up Bible study groups. I set up a blog, blogged very regularly. And if you are expecting to be trained in theology without devoting yourself to these sorts of things, you will be disappointed.

[6 : 08] It takes a lot of your own personal effort. It takes considerable work that is extracurricular, as it were, that won't be covered by a typical curriculum.

Other things that it won't train you in, you won't be rooted in a particular theological and ecclesiastical tradition. And so, for me, getting in contact with the Reformed tradition as a particular tradition, I didn't really have that within my theological education.

I had a more evangelical training in the Evangelical Theological College of Wales, and I had a broader theological education in the context of St Andrews and Durham. But in terms of getting to know the Reformed tradition as a particular tradition, and the wealth and the breadth of that, that's something I had to pick up by myself.

Partly that was helped by my father's library, by his publishing work, and then also by the fact that I've been involved with groups such as the Davenant Institute, which devotes itself to retrieval of the Reformed tradition.

And spending time around people who are reading deeply and studying deeply in these areas will help you. It's one of the things that you can gain if you're spending a lot of time with postgraduate students.

[7 : 22] You get a sense of their areas of specialty, and you sense just how much you don't know. That's one of the most important things you will learn in theology, how much you don't know, because otherwise you will find that there will be all sorts of prejudices that rush in to fill those areas of your ignorance, and prejudices that will dismiss the importance of the things that you don't know.

Spend a lot of time in groups that bring you into contact with people who have areas of interest that are quite outside your area of expertise. That really helps.

The other thing that you won't do so much is dig into a particular thinker. That is something that you will have to do in your own time. The drilling down deep into a particular thinker can really help you develop a distinct theological outlook and a sense of where you stand relative to others.

That is something that you will generally have to do in your own time. Church history was a big gap in my education. I wasn't given much church history. I had to fill that in in my own time. Ethics as well.

Something that I had to gain in my own time for the most part. And speaking to a broader area of social issues with ethics. That's something that I've really had to work on in my own areas of work. [8 : 42] Political theology. I had no political theology. I had to do that in my own time. And so many of the areas that I'm most engaged in and biblical theology in terms of typology, things like that, in the broad scope of scripture, I didn't really have much of that.

Liturgy, again, hardly anything of that. I had to get into that area as an area of special concern for my PhD. But before that, it was mostly just working on these areas as an area of particular interest that wasn't covered in the curriculum.

Rooting yourself in the particular tradition that you belong to. Again, philosophy. You won't find a great deal of philosophy in many courses. And if you're going to be conversant with the philosophical tradition, you're going to have to read people like Heidegger and Hegel and Kant and other people like that in your own time.

You'll be given an overview at the beginning of your systematic theology course, perhaps. But beyond that, that's if you're lucky. But you won't be drilling down on these thinkers unless you're doing it in your own time or if you've set that up as your special area of interest.

I've had to read these people for myself in my own time. You won't be trained in a lot of the work of theological rhetoric, the work of expressing a theological position well.

[10 : 01] That's not something you get much training in. Also, one of the things that I found particularly striking in my experience is seeing people who have theological training to a level of a terminal degree who cannot keep their cool in an online argument.

And one of the things that we need our education to provide us with is equipping us for dialogic context, not just context where you're monologuing in an essay, where you can engage with ideas in a very helpful and thoughtful way, but you're not actually engaging in the heat of the situation with other voices and learning to control yourself to speak persuasively or to use theology to write liturgy or prayers.

These are things that we're not really trained in. You need to learn to do that yourself. And these are things worth learning. These are things that if you look back in church history that the church fathers exemplified and others from church history, if you're reading someone like Calvin, you can see that within his work, a breadth of theological discipline that comes to bear, they each come to bear on each other.

So his work in the institutes in an area that's more systematic theology comes to bear upon his biblical work. And his biblical work in his work on preparing liturgies, things like that, these are all things that we have not been sufficiently trained in.

So spend time with, in your own time, expanding the area of your knowledge. Gain a peripheral vision. You need to be reading literature, you need to be reading science, social sciences, anthropology, philosophy, and all these different areas.

[11 : 43] History. History is a huge area that you need to dig into. And so to be a theologian that's just basically equipped to do your job, you need to have an extremely wide peripheral vision.

This is one of the things that has particularly concerned me getting into the area of the theology of the sexes. Because so many of the people who are writing in this area have a particular obsession with the issues around sexuality and gender, but they have not done the sufficient work to give them the breadth from which to speak into an area where there are so many issues coming to bear on that.

And it's not something that most people are equipped to do. There's a quote of David Bentley Hart that I often think of when I talk about the importance of training yourself broadly as a theologian. He writes, Now, as it happens, theology is actually a pitilessly demanding discipline concerning an immense, profoundly sophisticated legacy of hermeneutics, dialectics, and logic.

It deals in minute detail with a vast variety of concrete historical data. Over the centuries, it has incubated speculative systems of extraordinary rigour and intricacy, many of whose questions and methods continue to inform contemporary philosophy.

[13 : 04] And it does, when all is said and done, constitute the single intellectual, moral, spiritual, and cultural tradition uniting the classical, medieval, and early modern worlds.

