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From the SelectedWorks of Gregory A. Smith

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Building Your Library Strategically*

Gregory A. Smith

One of my responsibilities as Library Director at Baptist Bible College is overseeing the development of our library's collection. Over the last seven years we've spent more than $350,000 on books, periodicals, on-line databases, and other media. Needless to say, I've learned a lot about selecting library resources during this time.

Of course, building one's private library is different from developing a collection to support the research activities of hundreds of students and faculty. Nevertheless, I've found that many of the strategies I employ in building the Vick Library's collection have served me well as I've expanded my personal library. Below I will share seven principles of library development that should enable readers to build effective collections while wasting minimal amounts of time, money, and shelf space.

Several months ago, I asked my pastor, Bill Kolb, what advice he would offer preachers concerning the development of their libraries. He emphatically responded, "*Plan to spend money*." While this counsel may seem trite to the preacher who can't let a week pass without buying a few books, it is true that some will not accumulate resources simply because they don't allocate money to do so. My pastor explained that during the first half of his ministry he didn't place a priority on building his library. Over time he has come to view his books as the tools of a man who takes his work seriously.

Planning to spend money is also necessary because it is tempting to fill one's library with inexpensive books. I have personally bought many books simply because they were cheap, regardless of their quality or usefulness. However, I have come to realize that a book's price is often a reflection of its value. This isn't to say that there are no true bargains on the market, but we shouldn't be as concerned with cost as with quality. I'll say more about making wise selections later in this article.

Since building a good library will require us to spend money, we must find ways to set some aside. For some this may be a matter of making a regular budget allotment. Another approach is communicating one's needs to family and friends when they ask for gift-giving ideas. A third strategy is requesting a professional development stipend as a part of one's compensation package. As one seasoned Bible professor noted, congregations have responded to such needs in the past: "Churches seemed to catch the idea that their pastor's reading habits had something to do with their own spiritual welfare. Who ever heard of any objections that the ordination offering go to the new preacher's library?"[1]

A second principle modifies our understanding of the first: We must *resolve that bigger is not necessarily better*. As a matter of principle, it is better to buy one costly, high-quality book than five inexpensive ones that will prove to be of little substance. A classmate of mine accumulated a library at a rapid pace as he went through Bible college. By the time we graduated, his library consisted of some 3,000 volumes—many, I am afraid, chosen quite uncritically. I surmise that in recent years he has come to question some of his selections, not least because of the student loans he assumed in order to support his book-buying habit.

The bottom line is that we should exercise discipline in acquiring material for our libraries. If we find little use for a particular volume, we should sell it or give it to someone who can use it. For some of us, weeding our collections may prove quite painful. Several months ago I read of a church music library that housed scores for more than 2,600 anthems. If the church's choir were to sing a different anthem from its collection each week, it wouldn't repeat a number for more than 50 years! Quite obviously, some weeding could have saved storage space, left behind a higher-quality collection, and benefited a less fortunate church.[2] The same may be true of our personal libraries.

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It is no secret that we live in an information-rich society. Information is available to us in a mind-boggling array of media. An increasing amount of information of interest to pastors and missionaries is available in digital form. In this context, you must *choose the media and formats that will make up your library*. I use the word *library* loosely here. Etymologically, the word signifies a collection of books. Of course, we have come to understand that libraries house much more than just books: periodicals, sound and video recordings, software, and more. However, in recent years, libraries of all types have faced the dilemma of relinquishing *ownership* of collections in favor of *access* to on-line information.

As a result, today's preacher may choose Bible study resources in three basic forms: in print (books, periodicals, etc.), on digital media (diskettes, CD-ROMs, etc.), or via the World Wide Web. Each medium has its strengths and weaknesses. Paper-based media are relatively expensive and difficult to transport; in addition, they lack sophisticated search tools. However, the information they contain will remain usable for decades. Digital media are often more affordable (in part due to lower production costs) and take up very little space, but may be incompatible with computer operating systems and/or hardware in the future.

Web-based resources often provide powerful search options, but may become unavailable suddenly. Free sites usually provide little up-to-date, copyrighted material; they may also contain annoying advertisements. While fee-based sites feature access to current literature with little or no advertising, information is available only as long as one maintains a subscription. In addition, both digital and Web-based media are difficult to use in some places and situations, and may prevent the user from performing seemingly legitimate operations (cutting and pasting, printing, etc.). As a consequence, no medium should be touted as best for all preachers. One's choice of media should take account of factors such as affordability, quality, ease of use, reliability, and portability.

An additional dimension of the media/format equation is the fact that research resources—both print and electronic—appear in the form of reference materials, monographs, and periodical literature. It is easy to conceive of a library as a collection of books on specific topics (i.e., monographs). However, there is much to be said for building a personal library in which reference and periodical literature occupy a prominent place. Both consist of fairly brief articles that can be digested more easily than a typical book.

Periodical literature often allows a researcher to locate information that is more current than that contained in reference works and monographs. In addition, it addresses specialized topics that are not covered in monographs for one reason or another.[3] Reference works organize information in ways that make it easy to locate and use. Certain kinds of reference works, including dictionaries, encyclopedias, and handbooks—actually systematize knowledge.

By definition, reference works are sources designed to be consulted in part rather than read as a whole. (When was the last time you curled up in an easy chair to devour a volume of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*?) Reference resources relevant to Christian ministry include dictionaries, encyclopedias, atlases, surveys, commentaries, lexicons, and concordances. Whether in print or electronic form, they are absolutely essential to effective sermon and lesson preparation. This leads us to a fourth principle: *Build your reference collection first*.

In helping hundreds of library users over the years, I have found that a high percentage of questions—especially questions of fact—can be answered simply by consulting appropriate reference sources. In addition, reference articles are a logical place to begin one's research: They define terms, provide overviews of topics, and list resources for further reading. Therefore, it makes little sense for a preacher to focus on building another segment of his library before acquiring a critical mass of reference works.

What sorts of reference resources should a pastor or missionary own? Most importantly, he should collect in the area of biblical studies: Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias; concordances and indexes of

Bible words, phrases, and topics; Bible commentaries of various lengths and types; introductions to the Old and New Testaments; lexical resources to support study in the biblical languages; and bibliographies that will guide him in further reading on biblical topics. But the preacher's reference collection should extend far beyond the Bible, to systematic theology, various areas of practical theology (preaching, missions, counseling, leadership, worship, education, ethics, etc.), and church history.

Accumulating a collection such as I have just described is no small task. In fact, nearly eight years out of Bible college, I still find myself acquiring more reference resources than monographs or periodicals. While my personal collection is admittedly lacking in works on a variety of topics, my library supports robust study for lessons and sermons. My strategy for acquiring topical works—and for commentaries on specific books of the Bible as well—is simple: I purchase materials as my ministry requires it.

All of this leads to a very important question: How is one to *choose commentaries (and other sources) wisely*? Students often ask me if I can recommend a commentary on a particular Bible book, or a monograph on a particular topic. My answer is a qualified "yes." I do not necessarily know what the best books or commentaries are, but I know how to find out.[4] I understand that it is impossible for me to master a wide range of disciplines, and am willing to consider others' advice.

Some months ago I was beginning to prepare a Sunday School lesson series on the book of Romans. Quite obviously, I would need to consult some commentaries as I worked on my lessons. I was inundated with available sources. (The Vick Library's catalog lists 96 commentaries on Romans, not including some that are in sets on the New Testament or the entire Bible.) Faced with this dilemma, I chose to look at bibliographies and book reviews in order to identify the source(s) that would suit me best. Through the testimony of a number of experts, I found a high-quality, up-to-date commentary that was readable, yet did not ignore technical issues.

When I need to identify a well-respected work in an unfamiliar area, I typically appeal to bibliographies. Sometimes I am content to refer to the works cited at the end of an encyclopedia article on my topic. For example, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 4th edition, lists eight titles at the end of its entry on 2 Corinthians. (This is one reason why it's important to have an adequate supply of reference works on hand.) On other occasions I consult specialized bibliographies such as those by Cyril Barber, Robert Krauss, Jr., D. A. Carson, Tremper Longman, III, and Charles Spurgeon.[5] I also make use of book reviews, which appear in a wide variety of periodicals. (Having access to book reviews is one argument for including key periodicals in your library.) If I find that several authorities agree on the quality of a work, I feel greater confidence in acquiring it.

I propose two other ways of identifying the "best" books on a subject: First, solicit the opinion of peers and mentors. Your friends, associates, former professors, and ministry mentors may be able to supply valuable advice. Second, if at all possible, examine materials in a bookstore or on the Web before purchasing them. Doing so may save you the frustration of buying an item that will prove to be of little value to you.

A sixth principle of library development is this: *Take advantage of local library resources*. If you are fortunate enough to live near a Christian library,[6] you can use its resources for your own study and experiment with materials firsthand as you decide what to buy for yourself. Even public libraries have much to offer to ministers. Nearly forty years ago, Marie Loizeaux observed that public libraries might inform ministers concerning statistics, social trends, current affairs, modern culture, and more.[7] Many public libraries now offer their patrons access to massive databases via their Web sites, making it possible to do some research without ever visiting the library. Becoming familiar with local library resources allows you to focus your collection efforts in the areas that are most needful.

Finally, you should *collect (and read) across a broad range of subjects*. Doing so will obviously enhance your preaching and teaching. In addition, it will prepare you to meet the popular perception of

the minister as an information professional—someone who is expected to dispense reliable information on a variety of topics.[8]

There is no shortage of advice concerning what ministers should read. Below is a list of possibilities suggested by various Christian leaders:

- Leith Anderson: pastoral ministry[9]
- James Montgomery Boice: Bible, theology (biblical and systematic), history (especially biblical), and current issues[10]
- Jay Kesler: classics, novels[11]
- Gordon MacDonald: contemporary culture, Christian themes, major newspapers[12]
- Iain Murray: church history, including Christian biography[13]
- Richard Orchard: reference materials, devotional literature, biography, prophecy, fiction[14]
- William Shishko: devotional material, commentaries, pastoral theology[15]

This list is not a mandate, for, as Iain Murray observed, "there is one important lesson concerning books which we must always remember. It is that we are all at different stages in God's providential dealings with us. We should therefore be suspicious of any common programme of reading which, if followed, promises maximum and uniform benefit for every young preacher."[16]

In conclusion, I would like to encourage each reader to devote himself to personal and professional development throughout 2003. I echo John Arnold's call for pastors to devote a significant portion of each day to prayer, Bible study, and scholarly reading.[17] According to James Montgomery Boice, "the work of preparation should continue in some form throughout the ministry. The ministry should not only be an educated ministry. It should be educable and self-educating. If it is, the preacher will continue to be fresh, alive, and interesting. If it is not, his material will soon run out and the sermons will become repetitious and boring."[18] A pastor must be intellectually active if he is to persist and be effective in a ministry position. In Bob Baier's words, "You've got to study to stay."

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[1] Robert G. Delnay, "Resources for Preaching," *Faith Pulpit*, July 1999, 1.
[2] Bob Burroughs, "This Idea Will Work," *Church Musician Today*, April 2001, 41.
[3] Responses to a survey administered by *The Baptist Preacher* in 1996 suggested that pastors associated with the Baptist Bible Fellowship are not taking advantage of challenging periodical literature. Of particular concern was the finding that only 16% of respondents regularly read theological journals. Readership of specific periodicals was reported as follows: *Christianity Today* (11%); *Leadership* (19%); *Sword of the Lord* (49%); *Pulpit Helps* (55%); and other publications (62%). This data, never reported in print, was obtained from Keith Bassham, Executive Editor of the *Baptist Bible Tribune* and *The Baptist Preacher*, 11 Sept. 2002.
[4] British author Samuel Johnson stated, "Knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it." As a librarian, I aim for the latter.
[5] Cyril J. Barber, *The Minister's Library*, 2 vols. (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux, 1974-85); Cyril J. Barber and Robert M. Krauss, Jr., *An Introduction to Theological Research: A Guide for College and Seminary Students* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2000); D. A. Carson, *New Testament Commentary Survey*, 5th ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker; Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity, 2001); Tremper Longman, III, *Old Testament Commentary Survey*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); and Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1990) [includes reprint of *Commenting and Commentaries*].
[6] Christian libraries include those maintained by Christian schools, Bible colleges, Christian liberal arts colleges, theological seminaries, denominational headquarters, Christian publishers, and religious study centers. In addition, local church libraries are prevalent in many areas of the United States, especially among Southern Baptists.

[7] Marie D. Loizeaux, "The Minister and the Public Library," *Christianity Today*, 5 June 1964, 10-11. Loizeaux also called on ministers to assist public libraries in building better religious collections.
[8] Thomas M. Tanner, *What Ministers Know: A Qualitative Study of Pastors as Information Professionals* ([Evanston, Ill.]: American Theological Library Association; Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994).
[9] Leith Anderson et al, "Managing the Information Overload," *Leadership* 16 (spring 1995): 121-22.
[10] James Montgomery Boice, "The Preacher and Scholarship," in *The Preacher and Preaching: Reviving the Art in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1986), 95-97.
[11] Anderson et al, 125-26.
[12] Anderson et al, 126-27.
[13] Iain H. Murray, "Reading Church History," *The Banner of Truth*, no. 390 (1996): 10-20.
[14] Richard Orchard, "The Pastor and His Preaching-Teaching," in *And He Gave Pastors: Pastoral Theology in Action*, ed. Thomas F. Zimmerman (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1979), 172-78.
[15] William Shishko, "The Minister's Treasure," *The Banner of Truth*, no. 415 (1998): 16-21.
[16] Iain H. Murray, "The Preacher and Books," *The Banner of Truth*, no. 389 (1996): 7.
[17] John Arnold, "Pastor, Reclaim Your Calling," *The Baptist Preacher*, Sept. 2002, 23+.
[18] James Montgomery Boice, "The Preacher and Scholarship," 95.