

How to Avoid Being a Theological Ignoramus

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J.I. Packer tells a personal story about his freshman year in college (see Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, IVP, 1998, p. 9). The chaplain at his school took some of the students on “pastoral walks.” Packer was on one of those strolls and said of the chaplain, “He was urging me to read theology, the subject which he himself taught, as a sequel to the classics degree on which I embarked.” Packer explains the exchange that happened next.



I explained to him that I would rather not, since theology was so bad for one’s soul. ‘Nonsense!’ exploded he, with what may have been the loudest snort in history; ‘theology’s the queen of the sciences!’ Then he fell silent, and so did I, and thus we finished our walk.

Packer reflected on this encounter.

I thought him unenlightened. What he thought of me is not on record. But he had every reason to feel miffed. He was right, and knew enough to know that he was right, and I was as wrong as an opinionated ignoramus of eighteen could possibly be.

Why is the study of what the Bible teaches about various doctrines so critical? Bruce Milne gives us four reasons.

First, as a matter of plain fact every Christian is a theologian! . . . By virtue of being born again we have all begun to know God and therefore have a certain understanding of his nature and actions. That is, we all have a theology of sorts, whether or not we have ever sat down and pieced it together. So, properly understood, theology is not for a few religious eggheads with a flair for the abstract debate — it is everybody’s business. . . .

Secondly, getting doctrine right is the key to getting everything else right. If we are to know who God is, who we are, and what God wants of us, we need to study Scripture. . . .

Thirdly, the study of doctrine is an expression of loving the Lord with our minds (Mt. 22:37). . . .

Fourthly, doctrine is vital because it is impossible finally to separate Christ from the truths which Scripture reveals concerning him. There is no other Christ than the Christ who is known through the truths and doctrines of the whole Bible. (pp. 17-19)

Since sound doctrine is essential, what can we do to avoid being theological ignoramus?

1. Read the Best Book

Since the Bible is the source of sound doctrine, it is vital to have it flowing into your mind and heart consistently. To do this, you’ll need a *plan*. This doesn’t

mean you must commit to a “read through the Bible in a year” plan, though that can be advantageous. If you type “Bible reading plan” into a search engine, you’ll see that your options are seemingly endless! Perhaps your plan might be different than those, such as reading two or three books repetitively for a few months for five or six days a week, and then switching to other books of the Bible a few times through the year. The amount of reading isn’t as critical as consistency.

Additionally, your plan should include a *place* — that quiet location (might have to be a closet for some!) in the house that you go to at the same time most days to read the best book.

2. Read Good Books

The Lord has given his people Bible teachers who write in such a way that we gain doctrinal insight and gain and maintain spiritual health. We live in a remarkable day of reasonably priced (even free) resources readily available. If you need help knowing which book to read, get a recommendation from somebody you trust, and then make it a goal to read just a few pages a day. If you miss a day, no big deal. If you read just 3 pages a day for only 300 days in the year, that’s 900 pages toward not being a theological ignoramus!

3. Listen to Solid Teaching

You might think I have in mind primarily those exceptional Bible teachers online or on the radio. Though we all can benefit from those teachers, I first of all am thinking about your own Bible teachers in your church. It’s essential that you are in a church led by faithful, qualified men. If not, find one. If so, take advantage of this. Make the church’s meetings a priority, and when you are there, eagerly receive the teaching; listen carefully; pray for understanding; if appropriate, interact during the teaching; stay around afterward and talk with others about what you’ve learned. Years of this kind of commitment will make you a mature disciple.

4. Enjoy Helpful Music

Let’s think corporately first. Assuming your church sings theologically rich songs, do you pay attention to the words? As one pastor put it, hymns are “theology in memorable melodic form.” It’s a grace of God that we are wired to remember profound truths when accompanied by a good tune. We often pray for insight before a sermon, but maybe we need to start praying that way before we sing. And don’t forget, we not only sing to the Lord, but we sing to others for their benefit: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. . .” (Col. 3:16).

And then, personally, think carefully about the music you are pumping through your ear buds and sound systems. I’m not arguing against listening to secular music. I’m just asking you to consider what would be a helpful strategy through this medium to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.