

5 Reasons Pastors Should Read Over Their Heads

Whenever I talk about reading I try to throw in a lot of disclaimers. Reading is my “thing.” It’s what comes easily to me (more easily than, say, personal evangelism). So I always want to be careful that I don’t impose my passions on everyone else.

But even with that caveat, **I encourage pastors to regularly read over their heads.** This will mean different things to different men, but what I have in mind is the reading of academic writing. Well-meaning people sometimes call me a leading theologian or a scholar, but I’m not anything close to either. I write books, and hopefully my theology is pretty careful and pretty sound, but none of this means I do what real scholars do.

Very, very, very (did I say “very”) few pastors are called to engage in the highest levels of scholarship at the same time as pastoring a congregation. It’s just not possible, at least not for very long. But **most pastors should still make it a point to jump into the deep end of the pool and get in over their heads once in awhile.**

Let me give you a few reasons why.

1. **Reading scholarly stuff keeps you learning and learning keeps you fresh.** Most Christian books are fairly derivative. This isn’t necessarily bad. It just means that if you read nothing but the new releases on your Christian bookstore, you may not be challenged with new insights and new ideas on old topics and old truths.
2. **Reading scholarly stuff keeps you humble.** Granted, there is garbage in the academic world as much as there is garbage anywhere. But if you read an excellent scholarly work, like Richard Muller on [Post-Reformation Reformed Theology](#) or Scott Manetsch’s new book on [Calvin’s Company of Pastors](#), you’ll realize that you don’t know nearly as much as you thought. This can make you jealous or make you despair. Or it can make you humble and thankful. Even those of us who think we are well read, could be outpaced by an earnest grad student in most areas within a couple weeks.
3. **Reading scholarly stuff keeps you hungry.** When I read bad academic work I want to laugh, then cry, then ask for my money back. But when I read excellent work, I get excited to fill in the gaps of my knowledge and make connections I’ve never made before. Good pastors are voraciously curious—about people, about history, about the Bible, and about knowledge. Stay thirsty, my friends.
4. **Reading scholarly stuff keeps you balanced.** Again, I’m thinking of the fine academic work, not esoteric gibberish. When you read excellent scholarship you realize two important things: One, some of the sound bites and catch phrases that pass for good thinking and exegetical insights do not deserve to be taken seriously. And two, some of the confident assertions we make deserve to be more nuanced.
5. **Reading scholarly stuff keeps you edified.** We live in a place and in a time with an incredible wealth of Christian resources. We have many fine scholars teaching in our schools and seminaries. Most of them genuinely want to serve the church and further the cause of Christ. They have done us a tremendous favor by learning foreign languages, digging around in the desert, or hunkering down in archives, or committing

years of their lives to a single person, place, or idea. Let's take advantage of the best of their labors.

What does this mean for you as a pastor? I can't say for sure. But consider subscribing to a **good journal** like Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society) or Westminster Theological Journal. Don't dismiss every book that costs more than you think it's worth. **Plow through a book** on your shelf that only makes sense half of the time. **Find an area or a person you are really interested in** and take a few months to read as much as you can. Try to peruse at least one scholarly monograph each year. And best of all, **don't be afraid to read the old, big books** that these men and women are writing about.

Read more from Kevin [here](#).