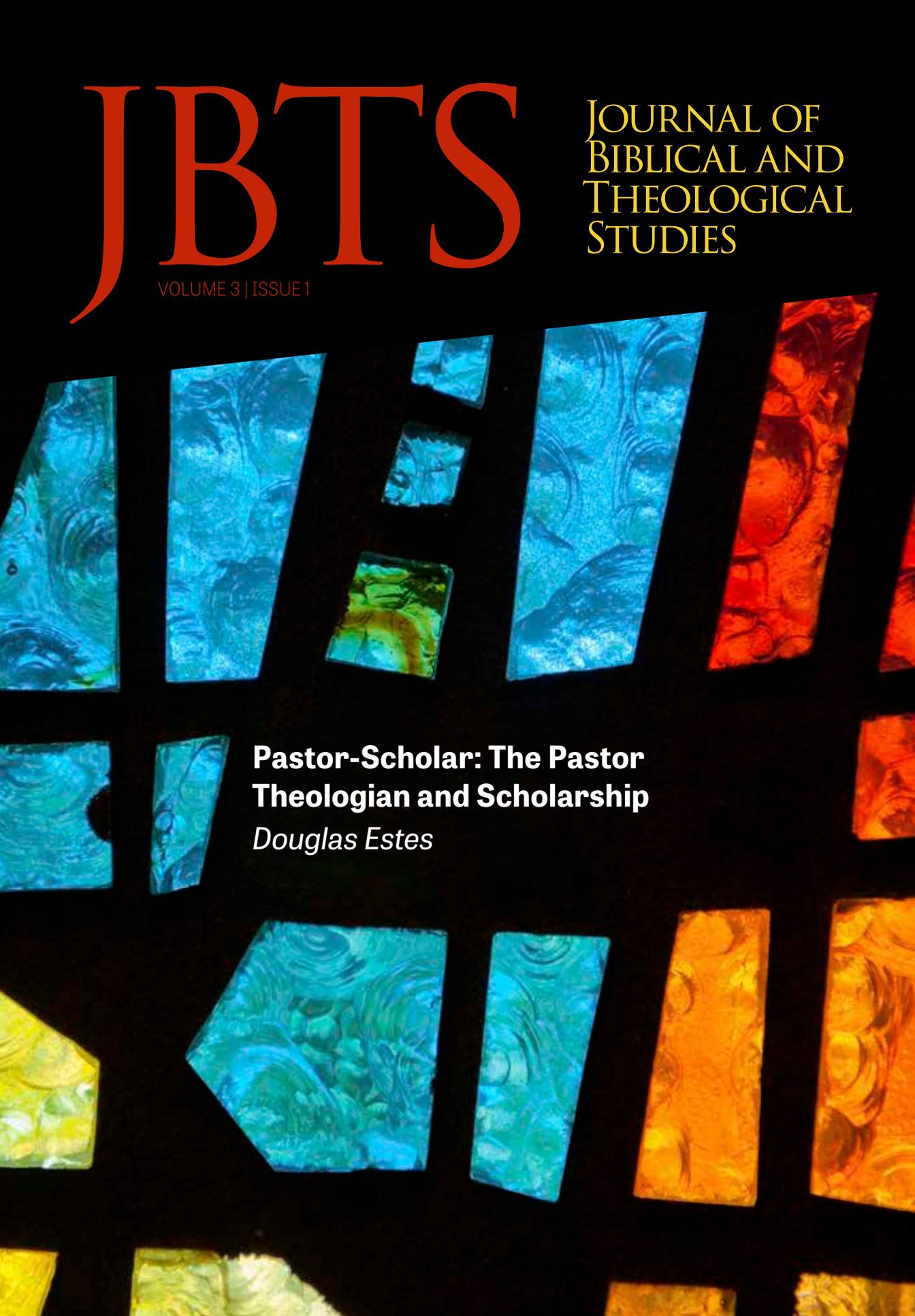


JBTS

VOLUME 3 | ISSUE 1

JOURNAL OF
BIBLICAL AND
THEOLOGICAL
STUDIES



**Pastor-Scholar: The Pastor
Theologian and Scholarship**

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Pastor-Scholar: The Pastor Theologian and Scholarship

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Abstract: There is a critical need today for pastor-scholars to serve the Church and to advance theological knowledge. The pastor who is a scholar will utilize the format of the written word to dialogue with an important part of modern society—scholars and educated readers—through the form of scholarly discourse. Though the pastor-scholar is not a common calling, once one embraces this calling, there are several essential characteristics that can positively impact the pastor-scholar’s profession and standing.

Key Words: pastor-scholar, pastor theologian, ecclesial theologian, scholarship, academics, writing, Augustine, Jonathan Edwards

In our modern world of peculiar career titles—key grip, chief value officer, penguinologist—the title of “pastor-scholar” may seem equally curious. In fact, to some ears the idea of a pastor-scholar might be a dubious title, along the lines of a plumber-painter or a provocateur-mime. Yet, in this short essay, I argue there is an vital need for pastor-scholars and offer some practical thoughts and suggestions on how to approach scholarship while serving the needs of a local church. By virtue of constraints of space and time, my thoughts are not exhaustive; much more could be said about the work of the pastor-scholar.

When I speak of a “pastor-scholar,” I have in mind a very specific individual: a person whose full-time effort is to serve a local church or ministry, and whose part-time effort is to engage academic scholarship—especially theological research that influences the lives of those engaged in postgraduate theological education (and by that, the larger world, through academia). As is often the case, it is easier to state the negative: by “pastor-scholar,” I do not mean a full-time academic who is also involved in a local church or ministry, nor do I mean a pastor who writes theology for

the sake of layfolks or other pastors. Both of these two roles are also important, but they are not in the scope of which I speak in this essay. For the purpose of placing the pastor-scholar in our greater world, I consider the pastor-scholar to be a subset of the general category of pastor theologian. Recent trends have created a renewed interest in the pastor theologian, and I view my ideas in this essay as a supportive addition to much of what has been said about pastor theologians.¹ In Hiestand and Wilson's taxonomy, I see the pastor-scholar as a special subset of the ecclesial theologian.² The difference between the ecclesial theologian proper and the pastor-scholar is typically one of audience; the pastor-scholar will devote time to writing and research at such a level that the audience will include members of higher academia. Though the pastor-scholar is the primary focus for this essay, I believe much of what I write about engaging scholarship in the context of a local church is applicable to other types of pastor theologians as well.

Hiestand, Wilson, Vanhoozer, Strachan, and others have well-articulated the valuable contribution, if not the critical need, for pastors to do theology for the greater world within their ecclesial context. For me, that argument is a given with the fertile soil for grappling with theology that occurs in local ministries. As a full-time professor now, I am rarely challenged by the rubber-meets-the-road struggles to interpret Scripture that was commonplace when I pastored full-time (unless I try to live vicariously through my students who are pastors). These struggles proved invaluable for thinking through the way the biblical texts work, not just what they mean. This is not to take anything away from the equally-critical role of highly-skilled professor-scholars, but to point out that both pastoral and professorial callings bring a great deal of value to the table.³ We—both church and world—are impoverished without both in our modern theological context. However, the recent emphasis on the pastor theologian reveals that there does exist some degree of impoverishment; specifically, a lack of pastors who work as public theologians today. One primary way we can fill this lack is by encouraging pastors—with scholarly gifting—to contribute to the larger world of theological scholarship as a part of their local pastoral ministry.

1. See for example, Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *The Pastor Theologian: Resurrecting an Ancient Vision* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015); Todd Wilson and Gerald Hiestand, *Becoming a Pastor Theologian: New Possibilities for Church Leadership* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016); Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); and Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson, *Beauty, Order, and Mystery: A Christian Vision of Human Sexuality* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2017).

2. Instead of trying to nuance Hiestand and Wilson's nomenclature (e.g. "ecclesial academic theologian" or other), I simply use "pastor-scholar" for the sake of clarity. Further, a pastor-scholar may not abide by all eight of Hiestand and Wilson's characteristics for the ecclesial theologian; see Hiestand and Wilson, *Pastor Theologian*, 88–101.

3. Even though I focus on the pastor-scholar in this essay, which implies that some pastors are not involved in scholarship, the same discontinuity exists in the academy, where though it is often assumed that all professors are involved in scholarship, in actual practice, some professors see their roles more as educators than scholars. Thus, we could speak of the professor-scholar in a similar way that we speak of the pastor-scholar.

Formats and Forms

As days advance, and centuries pass, there will always be the need to communicate afresh what we learn about the biblical texts, in different *formats* (e.g., oral pronouncements, written texts, digital media) and in different *forms* (e.g., devotionals, commentaries, critical scholarship). The pastor-scholar does theology in a limited format (mostly the written word) and in a very narrow form (mostly critical scholarship) to advance knowledge of the biblical text for an important audience in the modern world.

The *format* for engagement is today almost entirely by means of the written text. Writing occupies an important place in the Christian tradition; the words of God come through the written text and the (arguably) highest form of recommunication of the gospel occurs within written text. What is more, scholars base their work on the written word; if pastors wish to engage scholarship, it will be primarily through the written text. Whereas many pastors write to advance the gospel, the pastor-scholar writes to advance knowledge—particularly knowledge of the gospel/Christian tradition. At first glance, this statement may seem to imply—from a purely Christian perspective—that the pastor-scholar is inferior to the pastor. This is not the case, because a pastor’s work at writing is not as singular in its purpose as is often stated. However, instead of arguing this point, I merely note Augustine’s confession of the importance of the symbiotic relationship between writing and knowledge: “I admit that I try to be of the number of those who write by advancing in knowledge, and advance by writing.”⁴ The pastor-scholar is also one of that number whose calling is to write to advance knowledge, specifically knowledge of the Christian tradition.

The *form* for engagement is peculiar to the modern context. Scholarship (research for the sake of knowledge, but intended as a benefit to the world at large) is a form of communication that exists today that did not exist at the time of the early church. As a result, there are no exact precedents for the pastor-scholar in early church history; there were no universities in the ancient world to promote the form of literature we today call “scholarship.” A lack of early historical precedent, however, does not change the need for pastors to engage in scholarship. We can demonstrate this quickly through several historical examples, starting with the early church. When a need arose to communicate to early Christians more specific details about the life of Jesus—especially in a *format* that would be more useful as the world became smaller—early Christians used a *form* of communication that we today call a “gospel.”⁵ Similarly, as Paul and John felt the need to write rhetorically-oriented

4. Augustine of Hippo, *Letters (131–164)*, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Wilfrid Parsons, *Fathers of the Church* 20 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 150.

5. Here I do not suggest that the four Gospels of the canon are *sui generis*. All are, in short, adapted from Greco-Roman biographies, though with some creative genre-bending; cf. Harold W. Attridge, “Genre,” in *How John Works: Storytelling in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Douglas Estes and Ruth Sheridan, SBL RBS 86 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 1–22.

correctives and explanations of the gospel to dispersed Christians, they engaged in a creative reworking of the letter *form* to reach their audience.⁶ Justin Martyr surely knew of other dialogues, but he nevertheless adapted the *form* to meet his (and his culture's) needs.⁷ Though Augustine was most focused on weighty topics, he recognized the value of Laurentius' request to write something in a form, a handbook (*enchiridion*) that would be most useful. As knowledge of the biblical texts continued to grow, Christians of all stripes continued to write in many different forms to reach a larger audience—from commentaries, to creeds, to systematic theologies, to allegories, to children's novels, presumably each to fill a need within the larger culture. In this way, scholarship is a small but valuable form of discourse in the modern world, one in which some pastors are surely called to participate.

Characteristics of the Pastor-Scholar

How do pastors become pastor-scholars? There is not a simple answer to this question, as it is akin to asking how someone becomes a penguinologist. At the base, a person must have the general prerequisites of both a pastor and scholar—calling, experience, education, and more. The minimum requirements for both of these vocations are well-known. Beyond these minimums, however, there are other characteristics I find that a pastor-scholar requires. In the rest of this essay, I name several of the most important of these characteristics.

Pastor-scholars must be called to scholarship.

Often, the first question that arises is whether or not a pastor-scholar is even a viable enterprise. Modern churches today do not seem very fertile ground for a pastor who spends a great deal of time thinking, studying, and writing. However, it is viable, and may become slightly more viable in the future, but there are only a small percentage of pastors who are called to this type of ministry. It seems this is the case throughout church history; only a small percentage of pastors seemed to have theological influence outside their immediate context. The road of the pastor-scholar is not an easy one, and it should not be undertaken lightly. Thus, the pastor-scholar must be called; this calling solidifies the ground under their life and work even when people inside and outside of their local ministry context do not understand—or are opposed to—this calling.

6. For example, Douglas Estes, "John as Pastor Theologian: 2 John as Creative Theological Écriture," in *Becoming a Pastor Theologian: New Possibilities for Church Leadership*, ed. Todd Wilson and Gerald Hiestand (Downers Grove: IVP, 2016), 197–99.

7. Graham N. Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 234; and cf. Averil Cameron and Niels Gaul, eds., *Dialogues and Debates from Late Antiquity to Late Byzantium* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–6.

Writing scholarship requires regular vision-casting.

Most pastors in local church ministries are familiar with the idea of vision-casting. In order to participate in scholarship, a pastor must also regularly cast the vision for their calling as pastor theologian. What this may look like is regularly teaching the people in the local church context why scholarship is important—how ideas flow from scholars into common culture. Just as the vision of a church needs regular, consistent casting—lest people forget—so too does the pastor-scholar’s personal engagement with scholarship need regular, consistent vision-casting. A pastor-scholar should never assume church members will understand or approve of the calling to scholarship.⁸ Even those members who have in the past seemed to understand may quickly lose the vision if it is not regularly cast.

Pick an area of scholarship based on passion and for effect.

While the form may be narrow, scholarship does include a rather wide range of possible work. Pastors who wish to be scholars should pick an area based on their passion as well as the power of contributive effect of their work. If a pastor-scholar is not passionate about scholarship, with the challenges of writing in the midst of local church ministry, then writing will probably not happen. Moreover, scholarship does not necessarily mean simply writing biblical commentaries. Some pastor-scholars will have the opportunities to write commentaries, but many will not, at least early on in their careers. This does *not* mean that a pastor-scholar cannot make a significant contribution. There are many, many areas of scholarship where important contributions are waiting to be made. Maybe it is deciphering a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus, discovering relationships between a Hebraic and Septuagint section of Jeremiah, or creating a new argument within apophatic theology. Similarly, many professors also have niche areas where they make important contributions. If the calling is there, pastor-scholars may make important contributions to the advancement of knowledge.

Make time to write, but write in the time you have.

The path to scholarship is writing, and writing takes time. Fulfilling a call as a pastor of a local church ministry means a busy, hectic lifestyle. Yet, as a rule: In the 21st century, everyone is busy. Professors are very busy people too. No one has time to write the way pre-modern, aristocratic philosophers did. When my writing comes up in discussion, often people assume that I have more time to write now that I am a professor, but that isn’t true. I have about the same time; and in some ways, the time to participate in scholarship while serving as a pastor was easier than it is now as a professor. This is why, whatever the scholar’s role is, the scholar must learn to make

8. This is true even among congregations that do not struggle with anti-intellectualism, but especially true among those that do; close to 25 years after Mark Noll’s *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, this is still an issue.

the most of time as it comes to them. Sometimes that may be a whole day, but often it is only an hour here or there.⁹ While no two situations are the same, the pastor-scholar must evaluate their calendars and plan accordingly.

Talk about baseball and family, not scholarship, with members of the congregation. Because scholarship is a narrow form of communication, written in passive voice and filled with jargon (and German), it is a form that average people do not feel they can access. When a pastor-scholar chats with church members about their scholarship, many members may feel the subject is arcane, but they will listen because it is *their* (pastor's) scholarship. Since the pastor-scholar is passionate about their work, and the work is contributive, it will be tempting to talk about it regularly. Yet, if someone talks too much about themselves to others, it is a turn off—so also is it a turn off to talk too much about one's own scholarship. As a pastor, though, I loved the opportunity to talk about my work, but I learned quickly that in almost all cases it worked best to mention what I was working on in one or two sentences, and then quickly turn the conversation to the other person's family or something of mutual interest. If you find someone who truly wants to know more about your scholarship, and are trustworthy, consider it a treasure.

Encourage professors who also engage in scholarship. Just because a person is a professor does not mean they regularly participate in scholarship. Numerous professors get tenure (if their school offers it), and then focus largely on their teaching role. Professors often have difficult jobs; speaking only from my personal experience, the idea of a professor sitting in an ivory tower undisturbed for weeks on end thinking deep thoughts is a myth (or at least, a rare occurrence) in our world today. Pastor-scholars, working outside the modern-accepted guild, should create positive relationships with professors, building up their fellow travelers whenever possible. Since many, if not most, pastors and professors have never walked any steps in the other's occupations, it is incumbent on the pastor-scholar to build positive relationships with those whose careers are more closely associated with scholarship. When I participated in scholarship as a working pastor, I found some curiosity—but very rarely animosity—between professors engaged in scholarship with whom I had built some form of relationship with. Scholars are people, and we would do well to encourage them whether they are first pastors or first professors. Finally, writing, especially scholarship writing, is an incredibly difficult undertaking for all; rejections will occur, and pastor-scholars must not give in to “if I only were a professor ...” negative emotions. Nothing worthwhile is built quickly or easily.

Embrace the strengths and weaknesses of a pastor who engages scholarship. The strength and weakness of the pastor-scholar is context. Writing in general, and writing scholarship in particular, will take time away from your ministry, but if

9. Tremper Longman, “Writing in the Gaps,” *Didaktikos* 1:2 (2018): 12–13.

handled well, will also improve your ministry by bringing depth to your teaching.¹⁰ A strength of the pastor-scholar is that a local ministry context will sharpen their understanding of the how the biblical texts are meant to work in real-life situations. But the weakness of the pastor-scholar is that their context is outside the knowledge-sharpening conversations that often occur in academic environments. I always found focusing on the strengths of the pastor's context was superior to worrying over the weaknesses of the context. If you believe God has called you to a pastoral role, and to participate in scholarship, rejoice in those opportunities. They are vital, and exceptional.

The pastor-scholar is a bird of strange feather, created by need in the modern era to address a lack that occurs in theological discussion. We should not be surprised to find that in our generation, we are not the first to raise questions of the relationship between faith, ministry, and the advancement of knowledge. Douglas A. Sweeney notes this about Jonathan Edwards' love for the advancement of knowledge:

Edwards surely would have jumped at the chance to live with us today. He would have given almost anything for access to the historical and scientific knowledge that has burgeoned so dramatically since the early nineteenth century. His eighteenth-century world seems far away, a distant land. And Edwards was a man of his times. But he was also keenly curious and usually open-minded. He was a forward-looking thinker with an insatiable appetite for information about the Bible, its ancient historical contexts, and the structure of the natural world in which its events, stories, songs, poems, prophecies, morals, and other teachings were—and continued to be—realized.¹¹

From Augustine to Edwards to the pastor-scholar of today, participating in scholarship is a vital opportunity to advance knowledge of Christianity and to be sharpened by this advancement. For those called to this role, whether it be to explore new avenues for apophatic theology, or to identify a clue for a koine Greek lexical gloss in a yet-unread Oxyrhynchus Papyri, “whatever you do ... do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col 3:17 NIV).

10. This type of depth is not limited to pastor-scholars, but is often limited to pastor-theologians (whether acknowledged as such or not). I believe it is rooted in the passion to learn that, when harnessed, allows for truly thought-provoking teaching.

11. Douglas A. Sweeney, *Edwards the Exegete: Biblical Interpretation and Anglo-Protestant Culture on the Edge of the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4.