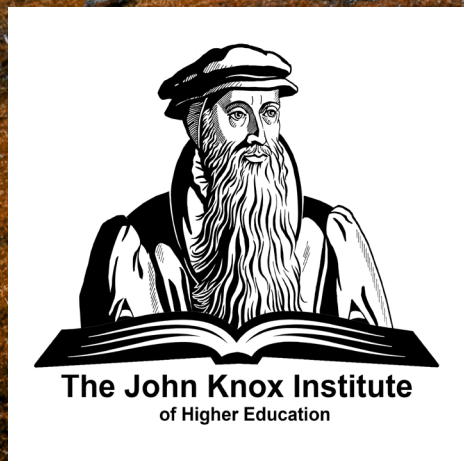


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #9
Habits of Study, part 2



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev Harry Woods recently retired as minister of Kilmorack & Strathglass Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Beaulie, Scotland, after having served as a minister of the Gospel since 1982. He was the editor of the monthly denominational youth magazine, *The Explorer*; for eleven years and taught Apologetics and Pastoral Theology at the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary in Inverness for eighteen years. He is married to Mairi, and has three adult children and three grandchildren.

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Lecture #9

Habits of Study, part 2

Welcome to lecture #9 of *Pastoral Theology*. We looked last time at some general *Habits of Study*. I want to look more particularly at some particular *Habits of Study*.

1. Establish a Balanced Reading Program

One of the first things that you should do, as a student, or as a minister, is *Establish a Balanced Reading Program*. Now, suggestions and details for such a program can be found in just about any book on pastoral theology. You might think, for example, of Martyn Lloyd-Jones,¹ *Preaching and Preachers*; or Charles Bridges,² *The Christian Ministry*; or Charles Spurgeon³ on *Lectures to My Students*. But there are at least six important areas of reading where we should be doing some kind of planned reading, and the six are these:

1. Firstly, **Devotional**—you should be reading material that is aimed at the heart and conscience. Books that stir the heart by focusing upon the Savior, or that challenge the conscience. You might think, for example, of Spurgeon's *The Soul Winner*; or Hugh Martin,⁴ *The Shadow of Calvary*.

2. The second area is **Theological**. And when I say theological, I don't just mean systematic theology, but theology in all of its departments—that is, systematic, biblical, historical, apologetical, and experiential. And by experiential, I mean the theology that looks at how the faith impacts upon the heart of the believer. Sometimes in the older writers, they called this “cases of conscience.” Try and work through some weighty theological work on a regular basis. Don't leave it just for special occasions when you're asked to do a paper or a study on something. And especially try and set up this program, and pursue this program early on in your ministry, because this will lay a good foundation for later in your ministry and in your study.

3. The third area is **Historical**, and of course, central to the preacher of the Word should be biblical and theological history. This helps us to immunize ourselves against heresy by giving us

¹ David Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) was a Welsh Congregationalist minister and medical doctor, influential in the Calvinist wing of the British evangelical movement of the 20th century. He served as minister of Westminster Chapel in London for almost 30 years.

² Charles Bridges (1794–1869) was a British Anglican preacher and theologian, most remembered today for his literary contributions.

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892) was an English Particular Baptist preacher, who remains highly influential among Christians of various denominations. He is known as “Prince of Preachers.”

⁴ Hugh Martin (1822–1885) was a Scottish Presbyterian minister and author. He joined with the Free Church of Scotland at the Disruption of 1843, and was one of the first ministers ordained and licensed to preach directly without a transfer from the Church of Scotland.

a grounding in the content of the Word of God. But history in general, secular history, helps us to gain a perspective on the world. It helps us to understand how God has been working in the events in our societies down through the generations. Jonathan Edwards⁵ wrote a book called *The History of Redemption*, and that is a book that chases the history of God's dealings with man down through the ages up to his own day. And in respect to this historical study, you should try and specialize in some area of particular interest to you. It might be looking at the Reformation, or the Covenanters. It might be a regional study of how the Lord has worked in your own country, and in your own society.

4. The fourth area is **Biography**. Paul counsels Timothy to consider those who lived their Christian life in such a way as they are marked out as examples for us to follow. And general biographies, that is, secular biographies, are helpful in revealing the best and the worst of humanity. You can read books that expose evil men, and you can read books that bring before us a good name. Again, we have to be careful when we are reading biographies, particularly Christian biographies, because there is a tendency in Christian biographies to what may be called hagiography, that is, writing as though these men were saints, or these women were saints in the wrong sense of sainthood.⁶ Again, when reading personal diaries of men or women down through the ages, especially if these diaries were not intended to be published, not intended to be made public, the writer may have written with an intensity that, perhaps, is not matched in the outward life. When we are writing and thinking carefully, sometimes we think more intensely than we do when we are actually in the situation and working away.

5. The fifth area is **Apologetics**. We are told by Paul that we are to be ready to give a reason for the hope that lies within us, and that means that we should keep up our apologetic reading, because, if we do not, we'll find it difficult to understand how to communicate with men and women in our present generation, and especially in a postmodern⁷ world, where truth and reality have become relative and person-specific.

6. The sixth area of a reading program is **Secular**. And in that, I would include things like contemporary news and literature, because that will help us to understand how our world is thinking. The written word is better able to convey the way the world is thinking than the visual media. The visual media has a propensity for distorting truth, and also for sinking into entertainment value. So it's good, if we get our daily information from the television, to make sure that we supplement that news, that information, with a good quality newspaper or a weekly magazine that is trustworthy.

Now, we live in a day when things have changed very dramatically in this whole area, because we are facing the rise of fake news, in which error is spread rapidly and taken as real and factual. Again, with the rise and implementation of AI,⁸ we find it difficult to know if what we are watching, or what we are listening to is actually the person themselves that the AI purports it to be. And so we must be careful and know, and we need discernment to appreciate and learn what is real.

There are times in the ministry when you will have to read harmful material, and you should see this as part of your calling. And as you come to such material, seek the Lord's help in order to

⁵ Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) was an American revivalist preacher, philosopher, a Congregationalist theologian, rooted in the Puritan heritage, exemplified in the Westminster Confession of Faith.

⁶ He is referring to the way that the Roman Catholic church wrongly declares a deceased person to be an official saint, elevating them above other Christians. The true biblical definition of "saint" is anyone, alive or dead, who is a true follower of Jesus Christ.

⁷ Postmodernism is a mid-20th century cultural movement in philosophy and literary theory, that generally questions the notion of universal truths, reshaping modernist thinking of the previous century.

⁸ "AI" stands for Artificial Intelligence, the simulation of human intelligence by computer systems.

be kept from it adversely affecting you. You can think of examples of matters like abortion, or drug misuse, or the dangers of pornography, or the origins of the universe. You may have to read stuff that is blatantly godless and unbiblical. But we have to, even when called to read such material, beware that secular reading can destroy your walk with God. And no study project can justify our backsliding, if it is the result of what we have been reading. And if you find that this is happening, then stop reading the material you're reading. That is a warning that we have to take to heart.

In this area of secular material and study, we have to be careful with secular interests and hobbies. Because, if we have a hobby—and it could be something as innocuous as woodworking, or cycling—we can find ourselves becoming absorbed in studying, reading, and delving into the depths of that study or that hobby. And so these hobbies and interests can assume an inappropriate place in our life. It's a place that Christ alone ought to have, that of all our attention, being our chief focus.

So much, then, for *Establishing a Balanced Reading Program*.

2. Some General Comments Regarding Reading

1. The first is this, that a planned reading schedule requires that we develop a plan and a schedule to follow. Now, this is not as difficult as it used to be, because you can find on the internet, for example, planned reading pamphlets that we can use. If you wanted to read through Calvin's⁹ *Institutes*,¹⁰ for example, you can get a planned schedule off the internet to read it through in a year or two years. The same thing would be true of reading á Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, and many other materials are available and should be looked for.

You may find, again, that it is best for you to concentrate on reading on one subject each study day. Or, if you find it convenient, you may better use your study day by having a number of books on the go¹¹ at once. So you read for an hour, and then you change over the next book. And you may read a devotional book, and then a theological book, and then a history book, and so on. And what that does is, it gives you a wide scope and a wide view of the work of the ministry.

If you adopt a method—and indeed, you should, but whatever method you adopt—you should have a notepad in which you can record the book's name and the pages you have read each day. This is especially important if you're reading multiple books on the same day, so that you might read thirty pages in a devotional book, fifty pages in an apologetic book, and so on. But it's important that you mark in your notepad what you've read, and when you've read it, and useful if at the side you have a place where you can make references or put notes.

2. The second *General Comment on Reading* is, don't make reading a substitute for thinking. The idea of reading is to make you think for yourself. You need to develop a healthy critical attitude to whatever you're reading. You need to be constantly questioning whether the writer is being logical or not. Does his argument hold together? Is it flowing? Is he contradicting himself? Is he departing from biblical teaching? Now, there's a place for skimming through books but that is really at the beginning when we are starting a new book, and we've already covered that—looking at the back page blurb, looking at the table of contents, looking at chapter headings or chapter summaries—and so we have to beware of only skimming the book, but nevertheless, we should skim at the outset of our study of a particular book.

⁹ John Calvin, or, Jean Calvin, (1509–1564) – was a well-known French theologian, pastor, writer, and leading Reformer in Geneva during the Protestant Reformation, after whom many Reformers patterned their teachings.

¹⁰ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, by John Calvin.

¹¹ "On the go" refers to things that are going on. In this case, several books are going on at the same time.

3. The third *General Comment on Reading* is, don't become proud or boastful about the number of books you have read. Sometimes people will say, "I have read ten books this week," or "I've read five books this week." Well, that is unimportant. The question is, have you learned anything from the ten or the five books? It's better to read fewer books and digest them well, and to read the best books, and to read them slowly, than to speed through everything just so as we could say, "Well, I've got to the end of that chapter." If we don't understand a chapter, go back, read it over, think about it, meditate upon it until you actually get the point of what the man or the woman is saying. Again, the important thing is, as I say, what you understand and what you retain in the books you've read.

4. On a practical level, it may be helpful if you team up with a fellow minister and agree both to read the same book with a view to discussing it in detail the next time you meet. Now that can be useful because people read books in different ways. Sometimes a man can read a book, and he picks up the general thrust of the argument—he's got a good overview; whereas, his companion in reading may read in such a way he picks up on the details, the nitty-gritty¹² of the argument, perhaps even flaws in the argument. And when we come together with our book buddy, as it were, we have the opportunity to discuss with these two different perspectives. This will also help in the matter of having fellowship with other ministers, and it will also sharpen our own intellectual powers.

5. And fifthly, and lastly, just another practical point—if you are reading and you discover that you keep getting headaches, or your eyes become gritty and sore and tired, then you should have your eyes checked if possible. Because you have to remember that reading is one of the central parts of your ministry.

So these are some *General Comments on Reading*, when we have *Established a Balanced Reading Program*. Thank you.

¹² "Nitty-gritty" refers to the most essential, basic, and practical details of a matter.