

SCHOLARLY TEMPTATIONS AND OBLIGATIONS

Scholarship is good. But scholars are just people, and people are vulnerable to temptations. Pause to think about potential pitfalls. And obligations.

Humility, not arrogance. Knowledge puffs up. This can be blatant or subtle. What can you do to cultivate humility and dependence on God when great knowledge tempts you to arrogance or when the praise of people puffs you up? How can the fruits of scholarship be communicated to the church without the appearance of arrogance?

Edification of others, not uselessness. Avoid fruitless speculation. Focus your attention on worthwhile efforts. If you can't explain the significance of your work to your spouse or to the church, then you should consider a change of direction. Research, pure or applied, should actually contribute. Knowledge should produce wisdom. Insights should be shared and taught, not hoarded privately.

Truth, not bias and dogmatism. Scholars in all fields aspire to open-minded pursuit of the truth. Ideally, every belief is potentially subject to review and to repudiation, although in practice certain basic points are unlikely to be challenged. Bias blinds to the truth and dogmatism binds to the faith. This is part of the universal human condition. We are closed-minded. We are unwilling to renounce errors even when confronted with what others find to be overwhelming evidence. Instinctively we seek to refute threatening evidence rather than to listen to it. We sincerely believe we are holding to truth even when we are not.

Scholars in all fields struggle with bias/dogmatism/stubbornness. But the problem of dogmatism is especially acute for the theologians, partly because theology may appeal to authority (of a creed, the Bible, a leader), partly because many theologians have a faith commitment which is not based entirely on scholarly canons of evidence, partly because theology is wedded to a community (the church) outside the scholarly discipline. How do you handle faith commitments that seem to be contradicted by evidence? How do you deal with human nature which suppresses the truth about God, rejecting and distorting the truth, and manufacturing alternatives to it?

Fear of God. For this topic, let's attend to Ecc 12:9–14. Boldface is an attempt to show connections with scholarship.

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also **taught knowledge** to the people; he **carefully evaluated** and arranged many proverbs. The Teacher sought to find delightful words, and to **write accurately truthful sayings**.

The words of the sages are like prods, and the collected sayings are like firmly fixed nails; they are given by one shepherd. Be warned, my son, of anything in addition to them. **There is no end to the making of many books, and much study is exhausting to the body.**

Having heard everything, I have reached this conclusion: Fear God and keep his commandments, because this is the whole duty of man. For God will evaluate every deed, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.