

Interview Tom Schreiner

by Art Azurdia



Thomas R. Schreiner has served as the Preaching Pastor at Clifton Baptist Church since 2001 and at Southern Seminary as the James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation since 1997. He also serves as Associate Dean, Scripture and Interpretation. Prior to joining the faculty at Southern, Dr. Schreiner taught at Bethel Theological Seminary and Azusa Pacific University. He earned his B.S. from Western Oregon University, his M.Div. and Th.M. from Western Seminary, and his Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary. A Pauline scholar, Dr. Schreiner has authored or edited several books on the subject. He and his wife, Diane, are the parents of four children and reside in Louisville, KY. Last summer, I had the privilege of sharing an evening meal with Dr. Schreiner and conducting the following interview regarding the relationship between theology and pastoral ministry.

Art Azurdia: Tom, what is it that excites you about theology? Why is theology important to you? Why have you given your life to it?

Tom Schreiner: I think theology is important because it affects our everyday lives. I became a Christian out of Catholicism and was introduced by those who mentored me to the Keswick view of the Christian life. Books such as *Victory in Christ*, by Charles Trumbull, and others by Major Ian Thomas, John Hunter, and Stewart Briscoe, were the only books I ever read. As a result, my life was focused on the victorious Christian life. I found myself continually failing but I kept thinking, "Well, I'm young. As I get older and more mature I'll reach the level of these great saints of God."

I was then advised that if I was called to ministry, I needed to go to seminary. I had no desire to go to seminary because I believed the people who taught at seminary were not spiritual – just academic. At twenty-two years old (five years after my conversion) I believed I knew everything. Nevertheless, I went to Western Seminary and immediately recognized in Earl Radmacher's hermeneutics class that I knew very little. I didn't even know how to study the Bible. I didn't know theology. Through my classes, I quickly began to realize that the view of the Christian life I embraced and taught didn't accord with Scripture. My seminary education was not abstract and unrelated to everyday life, for everything I learned in seminary related to my understanding of life. When I was learning soteriology and theology proper, it immediately impacted the way I lived and the way I understood my life. I found it immensely helpful. So for me, going to seminary was almost like a retreat.

AA: Who are some of the theologians you have found to be formative in terms of your own convictions?

TS: Augustine's writings against Pelagius are very helpful. Calvin's *Institutes* formed me significantly. I intentionally spent a lot of time in the primary sources. Luther's *Bondage of the Will* had a great influence on me. His 1535 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* is tremendous. I read a lot of Edwards – especially when I went to Bethlehem Baptist. In terms of contemporary scholars, I would say George Ladd. During the summer following my first year of seminary, I read George Ladd's *Theology of the New Testament*.

AA: Did you study with George Ladd when you were at Fuller Theological Seminary?

TS: No, he was in the hospital at that time. But his book had a huge influence on me as it opened up the “already not yet” theme in New Testament theology. Ladd’s writing is incredibly clear. John Piper’s preaching ministry has also shaped me significantly. I had already been out of seminary and teaching three years, but seeing theology worked out in the life of a church was tremendous. I had a bad ecclesiology coming out of seminary in the sense that I had given up on churches. I had begun to believe that the only place that would teach the Bible was a school. At Bethlehem I realized I was wrong.

AA: Well, perhaps we could piggyback on that a little bit, Tom, in terms of thinking about how you would define the relationship between theology and ministry. In other words, isn’t theology just for the academy? What bearing does theology have on the day-to-day, week in-week out life of the local congregation?

TS: I would say theology ought to inform ministry. If it doesn’t inform ministry, either something is wrong with your theology or something is drastically wrong with your view of ministry. They are not to be disconnected one from another. For example, our ecclesiology is to be formed by scripture. That was very important to the Reformers, the Puritans, and in the history of the evangelical movement. What does it mean to be a church? It means we are formed by the word of God. Too many churches are organized on pragmatic grounds. I also fear that we may lose the gospel because we think we know it already. On this point Luther is prophetic. He says that anybody who thinks they understand the gospel *does not* understand the gospel. He persistently said he was just a student of the gospel - not a master of the gospel. We *never* become masters of the gospel. We *always* remain students. Therefore, we must nurture ourselves with the gospel every day.

I’m very encouraged with a ministry like Tim Keller’s. Tim has a great understanding of the gospel and preaches it clearly.

AA: So you’ve mentioned John Piper and Tim Keller as contemporary models who exemplify what it is to be a pastoral theologian. Do you want to elaborate on that any more, Tom?

TS: Mark Dever and Ligon Duncan are among the many very faithful pastors out there. I think what I see in these pastors is a commitment to truth. They believe theology makes a difference and they’re able to forge a link between theology and the everyday life of the people. I believe it’s because they live it themselves. Their theology affects them. I think you sense that with any great preacher. When you hear Tim Keller, John Piper, or Mark Dever preach, you sense that the message has gripped them first. And so the theology doesn’t remain abstract - it’s contagious. Naturally, not everyone is as gifted as these preachers, but every preacher is to be gripped by what he himself is preaching. I had a person who influenced me in my college years who was very quiet, humble, and meek, but he preached with conviction and power through his personality.

AA: What will the consequences be for the evangelical community, Tom, if pastors refuse to be theologians? The predominant model seems to be a preoccupation with the CEO image; that effective pastoral ministry amounts to a mastery of pragmatic techniques. What will happen to the church of Jesus Christ (and let’s keep it confined to the American scene) if pastors refuse to be serious about the task of theology?

TS: I think we will lose the gospel of Jesus Christ and, if I understand David Wells correctly, we will slowly move into a new kind of liberalism. Perhaps we’re already moving in that direction now, at least in some quarters. I think we see some indications of that with the denial of penal substitution in some so-called evangelical circles. I just don’t understand how some can defend open theism as a viable evangelical alternative. Such theological amnesia is frightening to me.

Having grown up a Roman Catholic, I have recently visited Catholic churches in which I heard better exposition of scripture than in evangelical churches. That would not have happened when I was young. So much of evangelical preaching has been reduced to moralism . . . the “here’s what you ought to do” type of preaching. There is no theology. It’s just, “be a nice person.” Doesn’t that open the door for liberalism for the next generation? After all, liberal people think we ought to be moral people as well. We

are not proclaiming the gospel if we teach: "Here are five ways to have a great marriage and here's how to be a success in business," or, "here's how to be psychologically happy." This is not faithful preaching.

AA: Given the varying demands of the pastoral task, what are some of the steps you would suggest for pastors to steadily enhance their theological development? Do you have any practical suggestions for what pastors might do to maintain a sharp theological mind?

TS: First, every pastor should immerse himself in the scriptures. Study them. Meditate on them. Pray over them. Every pastor should also set aside time to read the greats - the books I was mentioning at the beginning. Don't ignore reading Calvin, Luther, Augustine, Edwards, Spurgeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones. There are many popular books today and we only have so much time. John Piper suggests pastors read for 15 minutes per day. That's what I did with Calvin's *Institutes*. I was out of seminary when I read them. I just put it by my bed and would read before I fell asleep. Slowly, I read the whole thing. Of course, there are good authors today worth reading, but it is important to set aside time to read the greats. Most of them are not difficult to understand.

AA: What are the current theological trends that arouse genuine concern for you?

TS: Open theism concerns me. The denial of penal substitution by some worries me greatly. It seems like there's a drumbeat against penal substitution and I fear, given our cultural climate, the adverse reaction to it will increase.

AA: If you think about what we'll be facing five or ten years from now, what are the issues that are going to demand robust theological answers from faithful pastors? What are the issues on which we will have to be absolutely definitive the next five to ten years?

TS: I think penal substitution is one of them. I think justification is another. The debate on justification is growing because of the new perspective on Paul. But I think we're going to have to articulate clearly what we mean by justification. We so easily forget what the gospel is. And of course, egalitarianism will not go away. It fits the cultural climate. Perhaps homosexuality will become more accepted as well.

AA: Are there theological trends that encourage you these days - positive things that you're seeing for which you give praise to God?

TS: The resurgence of reformed theology encourages me. The recent article by Collin Hansen in *Christianity Today* was excellent. Many of the young generation are encouraging to me. Many of the students who come to Southern are unabashedly theological. They are Christians in a culture that's becoming increasingly post-Christian so they're committed to the Bible. Whatever the Bible says, they believe. I see a real theological movement among these young, committed evangelicals. I think about the next generation, and I'm thrilled to see so many good students coming up.

AA: If you were given an hour to speak to a group of pastors and the subject matter was left entirely to your discretion, what would you want to say to them?

TS: That's a difficult question. I'd probably want to talk about the gospel. I have been so influenced lately by reading Luther's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (1535). The profundity and depth of his understanding of the gospel has thrilled me and has made me want to preach more on the gospel.

AA: Please name three books of theology that, in your view, every serious pastor ought to read.

TS: Every pastor ought to read Calvin's *Institutes*. What Calvin writes is very pastoral. There's a depth in Calvin - a historical depth. He not only interacts with scripture; he knows the church fathers. Too many evangelicals have historical amnesia in terms of the early church fathers. It's important to read the early church fathers, as well. Next would be Piper's book, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. Piper reminds us that we glorify God by enjoying Him. So many people who grew up in the church only

think of their relationship with God in terms of duty. Another book I recommend to pastors is one I mentioned earlier: Luther's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (1535).

AA: Thank you very much for your time, Tom.

TS: Thank you, Art.