WHY YOU SHOULD ORGANIZE YOUR PERSONAL THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY AND A WAY HOW

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Pastors, students, teachers, and scholars have at least one thing in common: personal theological libraries, whether meager, modest, decent, or deluxe. Unfortunately, many of us have another thing in common: disorganized libraries.

Why You Should Organize Your Personal Theological Library

I learned why I should organize my library from a contractor I'll call Bob. When I was in college, I worked part-time during the school-year and full-time during some summers as a subcontractor doing home-improvement. Bob, my patient, kindhearted boss, taught me how to finish basements, build decks, remodel rooms, paint, and landscape. He had serious skills with a massive tool-collection to match.

But Bob wasn't always organized. We often started an early morning by digging through hundreds of tools in his garage to find the ones we needed for that day's job. Sometimes the tools we needed were buried somewhere in his truck or home, and sometimes we couldn't find them. So we wasted time looking for them, wasted more time and money buying or renting replacements, or settled for inferior tools to do the job.

Bob's tools weren't always organized because he didn't deliberately and consistently organize them. But the time and discipline it takes to organize reaps benefits that far exceed the time and money wasted because of disorganization.

Just as a handyman needs a tool-collection to do his various jobs, so pastors, students, teachers, and scholars need personal theological libraries to do theirs. Suppose they were preparing a sermon series, research paper, lecture, or article or monograph on heaven. Ideally, early in their research they would assess what relevant resources on heaven they currently have in their personal libraries. But how do you do that efficiently if your library isn't organized? You might own resources on heaven in a variety of places: entire books, portions of books (e.g., chapters in systematic theologies, Festschrifts, or other topical books), articles, MP3s, blog posts, etc. Many people have not organized their library and are not able to take the time to search their library to find everything they own that is relevant to a given topic. So like Bob the contractor, they sometimes can't find the tools they need, waste time looking for them, waste more time and money buying or borrowing replacements, or settle for inferior tools to do the job.

Organizing your personal theological library enables you to function more efficiently and productively.

A Way to Organize Your Personal Theological Library

Few people would disagree that it's prudent to organize your library. The question is how. Personal libraries today can be more complex than they were a few decades ago because we may have print books and articles, electronic books in platforms like Logos Bible Software or Accordance, PDFs, Word docs, audiobooks, MP3s, videos, blog posts, and more. How do you organize your resources so that they are efficiently accessible?

Below I share how I organize my library. It certainly isn't the only way to do it, and it's probably not the best way. But the system works well for me given my personality, training, and goals, and it may stimulate you to develop or tweak your own system in a way that serves you well.

My organizational hub is Zotero. Good news: It's free (because it's generously funded at George Mason University). Here's how Zotero describes itself:

> [short description] Zotero [zoh-TAIR-oh] is a free, easy-to-use Firefox extension to help you collect, manage, cite, and share your research sources. It lives right where you do your work—in the web browser itself.

> [long description] Zotero is an easy-to-use yet powerful research tool that helps you gather, organize, and analyze sources (citations, full texts, web pages, images, and other objects), and lets you share the results of your research in a variety of ways. An extension to the popular open-source web browser Firefox, Zotero includes the best parts of older reference manager software (like EndNote)—the ability to store author, title, and publication fields and to export that information as formatted references—and the best parts of modern software and web applications (like iTunes and del.icio.us), such as the ability to interact, tag, and search in advanced ways. Zotero integrates tightly with online resources; it can sense when users are viewing a book, article, or other object on the web, and—on many major research and library sites—find and automatically save the full reference information for the item in the correct fields. Since it lives in the web browser, it can effortlessly transmit information to, and receive information from, other web services and applications; since it runs on one's personal computer, it can also communicate with software running there (such as Microsoft Word). And it can be used offline as well (e.g., on a plane, in an archive without WiFi).

Zotero will soon have "a standalone desktop version . . . with full integration into a variety of web browsers and a radically expanded application programming interface (API) to provide web and mobile access to Zotero libraries." Check out Zotero.org for more information such as video tutorials.

I use Zotero as my bibliographic manager for several reasons:

1. It is extremely efficient to have every electronic and print resource I own streamlined in a database that arranges them in an easy-to-find way. That's the main reason I use Zotero.

2. Zotero is compatible with Microsoft Word, which I use for preparing publications. My footnotes and bibliography seamlessly connect with Zotero so that once I enter the bibliographic information for an item in Zotero, I never do it manually again. It saved me dozens of hours last year when I wrote my dissertation.
3. You can sort items in Zotero like you sort items in iTunes. Zotero is like iTunes in this regard but better because Zotero's collections (parallel to playlists in iTunes) can have multiple subfolders like Windows Explorer. So you can type in a key word, an author's name, part of a book title, or whatever, and items will instantly appear.
4. You can add an item in Zotero to multiple collections (just like you can add a song in iTunes to multiple playlists). Arranging print books on bookshelves by categories limits you to specifying only one category for each book, but many books fit under more than one category. That's why it's easy for relevant books to slip through the cracks when studying a subject.
5. You can attach notes and documents to bibliographic entries in Zotero. For hundreds of items I have attached PDFs and/or notes I've taken while reading them.
6. Before I switched to Zotero, it was sometimes difficult to locate books that I knew I owned. That became more common as my library expanded. I'd ask myself, "Where's that book by So-in-So? Do I own a print version of that, or did I sell my print copy and upgrade to Logos? If it's in print, where did I put it? Did I categorize it as x, y, or z?" With Zotero, I can simply type a word or two in the search box to locate the item, see whether I own it, and see the format in which I own it. Rather than searching for an item on my bookshelves, Logos, hard drive, or other files, I start with Zotero.
7. Zotero is an excellent research tool for organizing articles in periodicals, including ones that you don't own. For many years my doctoral mentor, Don Carson, would set aside about half a day once a week to read, tag, and catalog articles in various periodicals relevant to his current and possible future research; now he squeezes in a half-hour here and there, adding up to about a half-day's work per week. (He uses Nota Bene for his research; I tried that expensive software and found it clunky and non-intuitive, so I sold it and reverted back to Word and Zotero.)
8. When friends email me for recommended resources on a particular topic, I simply go to the corresponding collection I've created in Zotero and drag the resources to my email, where they automatically display in an alphabetical bibliography. Resources copy and paste seamlessly in Word docs, emails, and blog posts.

So here's how I streamlined my print and electronic library in Zotero:

Enter the bibliographic information for each resource in Zotero.

This may take a while if you have a large library. I've entered over 13,000 items so far, and it took months of work. There are some shortcuts. For example:

1. You can import the bibliographic information from a book automatically from some sites (e.g., WorldCat.org) simply by pressing a Zotero icon in the URL bar, though you still may need to update a few things (e.g., change "Grand Rapids, Michigan" to "Grand Rapids").
2. If some items you are entering are very similar, you can right-click on an item, select "Duplicate Selected Item," and then tweak the duplicate.
3. You can export your Logos library to Zotero (though, unfortunately, you'll need to tweak the bibliographic information that imports into Zotero because it's not always accurate).

I divided the massive project into phases, starting with the smallest and working up to the largest:

1. Print. About 1100 items.
2. Attachments (esp. PDFs). About 1300 items.
3. Books in Logos Bible Software. About 3600 items.
4. Journal articles in Logos Bible Software. About 6500 items. (I could have entered hundreds more, but I skipped some that I didn't think I'd ever want to consult.)

This work is not mentally demanding, so I was able to listen to many sermons, lectures, and audiobooks while doing it. It's the sort of work that you could assign to an assistant if you have one.

Organize your resources in Zotero.

As you enter each resource into Zotero, organize it in corresponding folders. Every item is automatically part of the master folder, "My Library," but you can place an item in as many subfolders as you'd like. You may want to place an article on Romans 9, for example, in a collection on Romans as well as a collection on election. So organize your folders in a way that serves you best; it should reflect the way you think. The topical indexes at The Gospel Coalition and Desiring God are helpful places to get ideas how to organize your categories. This is the basic framework for how I've organized my library in Zotero (many of the subcategories have further subcategories, which you can view in this video).
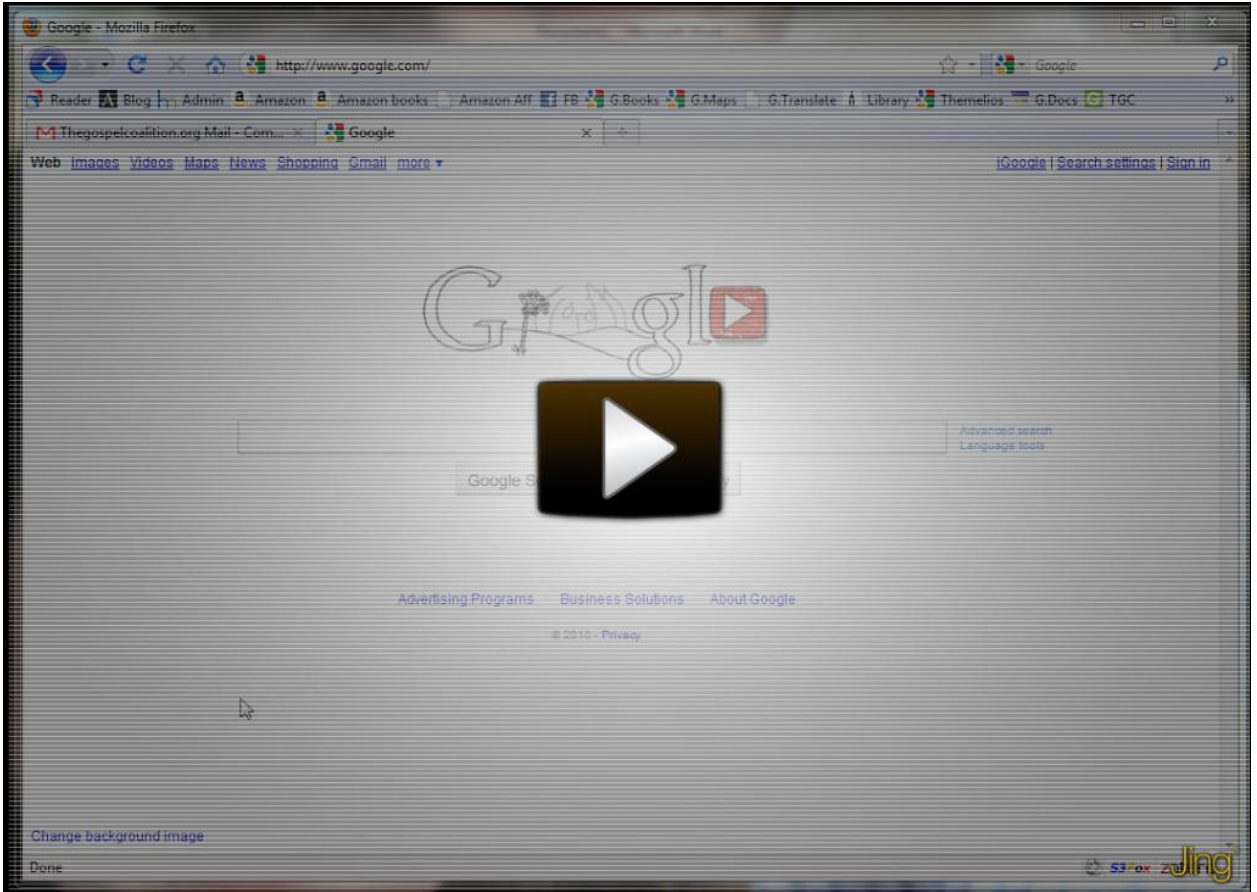
1. My Personal Library. Every resource that I own is plugged in to at least one of the following five subcategories in addition to others below.
   - Attachments (esp. PDFs)
   - Audiobooks
   - Films (DVDs)
   - Logos
   - Print
2. Exegesis and Biblical Theology
   - Hermeneutics
   - New Testament. This breaks down into Gospels, Greek, Individual NT Books, Johannine Studies, Letters, NT History, NT Introduction and Survey, NT People, NT Textual Criticism, NT Theology, and Pauline Studies. For the individual NT and OT books, the main collections include resources on the entire biblical book (e.g., commentaries), and subfolders include special studies (e.g., books and articles on only a portion of a biblical book).
   - Old Testament. This breaks down into Hebrew, Individual OT Books, Jesus in the OT, OT History, OT Introduction and Survey, OT People, OT Textual

Criticism, OT Theology, Pentateuch, Poetry, Prophecy, and Wisdom Literature.

- Primary Sources. Bibles in English, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and modern languages.
- Second Temple Judaism
- Whole Bible. This includes General Reference, Geography, Survey of Resources (e.g., commentary survey), Whole-Bible Biblical Theology (e.g., Kingdom of God, OT in the NT, Salvation History, Typology), Whole-Bible Commentary, and Whole-Bible Introduction and Survey.

3. Historical Theology
- Introduction and Survey
- Groups and Ideologies
- Historiography
- Individuals
- Periods of History

4. Other. This is for mostly my non-theological resources.
- Art
- Astronomy
- General Reference (e.g., encyclopedia, dictionary)
- Geography
- History and Biography
- Humor
- Languages
- Logic
- Novels
- Poetry
- Productivity (includes time management)
- Research and Writing
- Science

5. Practical Theology
- Christian Liberty and Lifestyle Choices
- Christian Living: General (e.g., devotionals)
- Counseling and Psychology
- Culture
- Education and Scholarship
- Ethics. Subcategories include Abortion, Bioethics, Cremation vs. Burial, Death Penalty, Environment, Ethnicity, Euthanasia, Sexuality, Stem-Cell Research and Cloning, and War.
- Evangelism and Discipleship. Subcategories include Church-Growth Movement, Missions, and Small Groups.

- Family. Subcategories include Children, Manhood and Womanhood, Marriage, and Parenting.
- Knowing God's Will
- Leadership
- Mind and Emotions
- Money and Possessions
- Pastoral Theology
- Politics (church and state)
- Prayer
- Preaching
- Sabbath and Lord's Day
- Sins
- Social Issues (e.g., poverty, deeds of mercy, public justice)
- Technology
- Worship (includes music debate)

6. Systematic Theology
   - Apologetics. Subcategories include Approaches (esp. presuppositionalism), Atheism and Agnosticism, Cults, Miracles, Problem of Evil and Suffering, Reliability of the Bible, and World Religions.
   - Bible Doctrine. This includes the basic categories in a typical systematic theology and subcategories for each.
   - Philosophy
7. Lists. This allows me to keep track of items I'd like to buy, read, or listen to, as well as ones that I've lent out (along with a dated note listing the person I lent the resource to).

I also enter items into Zotero that I don't own (e.g., a library book that I checked out or a book I added after hearing a professor recommend it in a lecture or seeing a friend recommend it on his blog). To distinguish books that I own from others, I apply "Tags" to the items I own; I tag every item with "Own" and tag some of those with "Own Attachment," "Own in Logos," and/or "Own in Print." That way if I'm looking at a list of all my resources on, say, "Atheism and Agnosticism," I can simply click the tag "Own" to see which of those items I already own. And if I want to look at a specific item, I can know immediately in what format I own it.

Arrange your print books on your bookshelves in alphabetical order by author.

I can think of at least three viable ways to organize your print books:
1. System. This is how libraries do it, usually by the Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal System. Some of my friends organize their personal libraries this way, and it works well for them. It makes sense if your personal library is massive and you have an assistant to organize it, but for most people I think it's a lot of unnecessary work.

2. Topic. This is what I did until I started using Zotero, and I suspect that it's what most people do. It's convenient to grab a line of books on Romans, for example, if you're studying a passage on Romans. But it's also easy for other relevant books to slip through the cracks, and it can be hard to locate books that you know you own.

3. Alphabetical order by author. This is what makes the most sense to me right now. It's clear, comprehensive, and simple. My books are very easy to locate because I line them up in alphabetical order by author; that's the same order they would appear in a bibliography, so those rules apply for items with multiple authors or no authors. And now nothing slips through the cracks since I'm using Zotero instead of my memory combined with a topical arrangement on my bookshelves.

Conclusion

It's wise to organize your library so that you can research efficiently, and this article suggests one way to do that today by using Zotero. The organizational method we use is merely a tool—a means to an end. And the end is to glorify God as good stewards of his varied grace.

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