

Abiding Principles

Creating a Useful, Accessible, & Connected Theological Library

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THIS ESSAY SEEKS TO PROVIDE SOME GUIDANCE FOR DEVELOPING A theological library when resources are few. The hope is that the principles outlined here will also be of benefit to those libraries where resources may be more plentiful. Earlier measures of the health of a library's collection centered on its size, but a more helpful criterion today is the collection's use. How is the collection supporting the research and curricular needs of its institution? Are researchers able to find what they need, regardless of the size of the library? A useful library does not need to be a large library, but it does need to be developed with its users, or researchers, in mind. The good news here is that endless resources are not necessary to create a functional and excellent theological library. The challenge is that a well-used theological library must be developed in such a way that it is indeed useful to its researchers. This involves providing access to foundational and authoritative resources and being aware of the particular research and curricular needs of the institution's faculty and

students. Beyond use, two other criteria should be considered when developing a theological collection: access and partnerships. Access is important in many contexts but became especially pronounced during the pandemic when researchers were sometimes cut off even from their own institution's physical library. Partnerships are helpful in providing additional avenues for access and for deferring the acquisition of materials that might not be needed in perpetuity by the home institution. By focusing on use, access, and partnerships, it should be possible to create a strong theological library, even when resources are limited.

A Useful Library

The ongoing development of a theological collection can take many different forms. Some libraries have seemingly limitless resources and are able to follow a just-in-case model of acquisition where books and other media are acquired before any request is made from the researcher. There, acquisitions anticipate future use. Popular methods for developing a just-in-case library collection are approval plans and standing orders. Few libraries can follow this model anymore. Other libraries need to be more careful with their limited resources and must follow a just-in-time model of acquisition where books or other media are acquired on the basis of requests from the researcher. There, acquisitions are generated by actual use. Such libraries are often reliant on borrowing material from other libraries or purchasing it promptly if possible. The just-in-case library is likely to be quite large and the just-in-time library small, but the size of the collection does not determine how good a collection is. For that, it is necessary to understand how any collection is used.

It is unlikely that readers are coming to this article looking for specific titles of books or other resources to add to their theological collections. Many theological collections have the same building blocks: scriptural commentaries; dictionaries, handbooks, and encyclopedias; lexical and grammatical aids for the study of ancient languages; primary sources in the original languages and/or translation; and authoritative monographs. What exactly to purchase necessarily involves the very important question of use. Who will be using these resources, and how? This will affect both resource selection and format preference.

Perhaps the sharpest distinction is between research use and curricular use. The former involves supporting the pursuit of a highly specialized topic with the end goal of adding something new to the scholarly record. The latter is closely tied to the instructional function of the institution. There, it is important to build a theological collection that can support the pedagogical vision of the institution. Research needs are often individual, meaning the resources will only need to be consulted once or by only one person. Curricular needs are often communal, meaning that many students will often be consulting the same resources.

Research and curricular needs can be mapped often, but not always, to faculty and students respectively, because the information needs of theological faculty and students are generally defined by the expected output of their research. Faculty research tends to be done to prepare for courses or to produce scholarship for tenure or career progression (Wenderoth 2007; Cooper and Schonfeld 2017). Very little research is done by faculty for the sole purpose of curiosity; promotions, honors, and reputation are often dependent upon publishing in the right journals and with the most prestigious publishers. For students, course syllabi and assignments usually define the scope of that research (Lincoln and Lincoln 2011). Students attempt to research whatever is necessary to complete the assignment, and often only that.

Between the two, research needs are those that likely cannot be substituted. If a resource is needed for research, either that particular item will need to be found or its absence will be a gap in the research. For curricular needs, there may be a preference for a particular resource, but this, even with difficulty (and possibly great grumbling from the faculty member), can likely be replaced with a different reading.

The greatest challenge for developing a theological library is to support the research activity of its most demanding researchers. Faculty have been trained (rightly) that it is important to consult the relevant literature before making new authoritative claims in their fields. The good news, if it can be called that, is that faculty have avenues other than the library to support their research. Many faculty do their research from home, not at the library, as Wenderoth (2007, 180) confirms: “No one, no one, no one goes to the seminary library to begin their research.” There appear to be three primary reasons why this is the case: a desire to avoid distractions, preferred discovery behaviors, and personal collections and libraries. First, faculty

avoid going to the library in order to avoid running into students or other distractions. As Wenderoth observes, “The seminary library is a landmine strewn with pesky students” (179). Second, as already noted, the preferred entry into a research topic initially for faculty is not found at the library. Instead, they rely on their informal network of colleagues and other information sources (Gorman 1990; Michels 2005; Wenderoth 2007; Penner 2009), or they search on the web, using some combination of sites like Google and Amazon (Wenderoth 2007; Cooper and Schonfeld 2017). Finally, many faculty simply rely on their own personal collections and libraries, instead of the institutional library (Gorman 1990; Penner 2009; Cooper and Schonfeld 2017). Personal collections are just as, if not more, important than institutional collections (Gorman 1990). Since research can be so specialized, some scholars may have better personal collections and libraries with respect to their topic than the library’s collections at their academic institutions. “Religious studies scholars develop significant information collections over the course of their careers and these activities are generally unmediated by their institutions or informational professionals” (Cooper and Schonfeld 2017, 37). Still, the library has an important role to play in helping faculty to locate and access materials that might otherwise be unavailable to them.

Contrary to the exacting research demands of faculty, most theological libraries can naturally support the curricular needs of the institution, or those resources can often be located without too much difficulty. The world tends to be awash in older commentaries, bibles, and authoritative monographs that can be used to support curriculum. The challenges here are related to acquiring materials for interdisciplinary topics or new courses, where acquisitions beyond the typical collecting scope are required.

Library access to resources should not dictate research or curriculum, but at times this is unavoidable, especially when hard-to-locate resources cannot be sourced in a fiscally responsible way. At other times, lack of access is also unforeseeable, as happened to many libraries starting in early 2020.

An Accessible Library

The pandemic disruptions and shutdowns made one thing very clear: collection development is also about access, or, at the very least, the

two are inextricably linked. What this looked like for many was that the library's local print collection was inaccessible or, at least, access was limited for a time; ILL was suspended; partners who formerly provided reciprocal borrowing needed to focus on the safety of their own communities first; books were being published, but not shipped or cataloged; or, conversely, books were not being published. The somewhat free flow of information was suddenly interrupted. It is hard to imagine that many could have foreseen this disruption.

Much of this disruption was due to this fact: print still dominates the theological world, at least insofar as researcher preference and publication models are concerned. In general, theological faculty and students consistently show a preference for books over other information sources (Gorman 1990; Penner 2009; Lincoln and Lincoln 2011; Gaba and Ganski 2011). "Theologians want books on shelves, and this has implications not only for how theological librarians function but also how strongly they lobby for improved acquisitions budgets for both current and retrospective collection development" (Gorman 1990, 155). Theological students are "quite book and print bound" (Penner 2009, 66). What the pandemic made evident is that even the local holdings of a library may not be fully utilized when access is restricted.

When it became more difficult to handle physical items during the pandemic, access to theological collections suffered, and so too did research possibilities and use. One thing that kept me up at night was thinking about all of the books, articles, dissertations, and other scholarly outputs that simply were not being advanced due to a lack of access to the necessary resources.

One of the easiest ways to pandemic-proof a collection is through the acquisition of digital resources. There are tremendous digital resources available now to aid in the study of theology and its related disciplines. The most-used database at my institution is Atla Religion Database with Atla Serials Plus. This database provides easy search across a number of full text journals. Its distinguishing feature from other EBSCO databases is the ability to search using the Scriptures Index. It is hard to imagine a theological library that would not find this product to be useful. These Atla databases can also be made accessible to libraries in developing countries through subsidies or through the sponsorship of other institutions.

There are also growing digital initiatives that can provide access to theological content. Atla Digital Library, Theological Commons (Princeton Theological Seminary's digital library), and the Digital

Theological Library are some examples among a crowded field. Other good news is that mass digitization is increasingly making both out-of-copyright and even copyrighted material available for researchers. When print collections became inaccessible due to the pandemic, many libraries turned to HathiTrust to gain digital access to books they held in print. Internet Archive has also been a strong leader in making resources more widely available to anyone with an internet connection. If a resource is not available locally, it is important (and often rewarding) to check whether the resource has already been digitized and is available somewhere online. Beyond those mentioned above, Google Books and Amazon's Look Inside feature can sometimes provide the needed window of information. There are countless other freely available resources online for finding material that might be useful to theological faculty and students.

A newer model used by libraries to leverage their legacy print collections is controlled digital lending, the process of making a digital copy of a print book available on an owned-to-loaned ratio. This is especially useful for those books that have not been digitized and made accessible digitally to institutions by publishers or aggregate vendors. Further good news is that CDL does not only benefit the library digitizing the copy. It is possible for libraries with fewer resources to take advantage of the digitalization done by other libraries to gain access to the needed information.

Another way of providing database access to certain individuals is through negotiating for alumni access. This often comes at an additional cost, but not always. It may be that faculty of an institution are able to gain access to additional electronic databases through their alma mater. This may be one more way that the research needs of theological faculty can be satisfied.

Finally, evidence-based acquisition models are especially useful because they provide access, generally, to a publisher's full catalog of e-books for an up-front deposit amount that will then be applied to the perpetual purchase of resources at the end of the EBA period. This is a good way to use limited resources to acquire materials that have been used, based on analytics. What makes this model preferable over the earlier patron-driven acquisition or demand-driven acquisition models is that the actual purchase decision is still made by the librarian who can think about how such a perpetual purchase would help to shape the collection for the future.

While this wealth of digital options is promising, and some will argue that it is possible to create a fully digital theological library

now, the publisher market just is not there yet. That the Anchor Bible Dictionary and Commentaries were only very recently made available digitally to institutions is a sign of how much backlist material still remains to be offered in that format. There are many other titles that I as a collection development librarian would love to purchase for my library in digital format but cannot, because print is still the only format option for so many publications in theology and related disciplines. The other challenge from a publishing point of view is that the more popular a title is, the less likely it is to be made available digitally on an unlimited-user access model. The publisher will want the institution to buy multiple single-user access copies. Perhaps some day the publishing models will change, and theological literature will be more widely available digitally. Then, it will be necessary to convince researchers that the digital format gives them benefits over the print and that they should shift their reading preferences there. For now, “digital research is both ubiquitous and marginal,” or, in other words, “everyone” is doing it, but not everyone is doing it well (Cooper and Schonfeld 2017, 35).

It is hard to imagine a better collection than one where all research was accessible and could be retrieved simply at the request of a researcher. Increased digitization is making some of this a reality, but the goal is still well in the future. Having discussed both use and access, the final proposal for those seeking to build theological collections is to think about building better connections.

A Connected Library

The future of library collections has been trending toward cooperative collection development—the belief that no library collection can be comprehensive enough to be fully independent and that partnerships are necessary. This is true even of very large libraries, as evidenced by the collections at ReCAP (provided by Princeton University, Columbia University, New York Public Library, and Harvard University) and Ivy Plus that can ferry resources quickly between some of the best libraries in the world. Libraries, recognizing the deficiencies inherent in any attempt at self-sufficiency, have sought partnerships through consortia, regional partners, collectives, and other models for resource sharing. The resource sharing model used by almost

all libraries is interlibrary loan, but local and regional partnerships have also been important.

Use and access can help you to determine what to buy for your library; partnerships can help you decide what you do not need to buy. It is time for libraries to begin considering a connection development policy if there is not one already in place. What strategic partners can help to advance access to useful resources? Where might there be a mutually beneficial relationship where both partners are able to extend their collections by having access to one another's? This is both a judicious use of resources and a way to access more with less.

Since the primary purpose of this article is to give some basic guidelines for building a theological collection with limited resources, I reached out to Wayne Bornholdt, director of acquisitions at the Theological Book Network (TBN) to discuss resource acquisition for such libraries. TBN has been a partner to many of them. As stated on their website, “[TBN] ship[s] high-quality theological resources to under-resourced theological schools in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East.” TBN is often contracted by foundations or churches who have schools that they want to support by building theological collections there. TBN receives donations of in-scope theological books (these include books on certain subjects published in the last 30 years) and matches their inventory to the requests of the destination institution. Even when TBN might not be able to provide specific books, they can often provide alternatives and support subject collections broadly. This is likely the easiest way for an institution with limited resources to create a theological collection: by partnering with a donor and using TBN's services. Well-resourced theological libraries have a role to play in this cycle by donating unneeded books that fit TBN's scope. This partnership among TBN, well-resourced libraries, and under-resourced libraries can help to redistribute theological resources where they are needed most.

The pandemic and the uncertainty caused by it frustrated many partnerships. Some researchers had trouble accessing their own library's collections, let alone the collections of other libraries. This predicament suggests that cooperative collection development alone will not be enough to ensure continued access to important resources. Even now, well into the third year of the pandemic, some libraries are closed to those outside their immediate community, making partnerships and resource sharing even more difficult.

Difficulties do not mean, however, that these efforts should cease, but that partnerships should be strengthened and that continued access should be a priority. Many libraries have already become adept at giving limited access to their print collections through curbside delivery and scanning services. Such practices will make it easier to provide access should lockdowns be needed again in the future.

Conclusion

Use, access, and connections inform and support the development of theological libraries. It is in the best interest of all theological libraries (those more and less resourced) to focus on those three issues when developing such a collection. Does your library meet the needs of its users? Are the collections accessible? Have you established partnerships to provide further access to resources to meet your users' needs? Exploring these three questions can help those libraries then prioritize which resources need to be bought and which can be borrowed from other partners. The best theological collection is one that will be useful and accessible to its patrons. Partnerships provide other access points for resources outside of the collecting scope or budgetary constraints of the library. The truth is that all libraries have limited resources, even if these limits are large. The theological record is simply too great for any one library to collect on its own.

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