

Pondering and Preparing for a PhD in Theological Studies

Dan Treier

If you are pondering a PhD in biblical/theological studies, then the rapidly changing job market makes it vital to be prayerful, realistic, and wise. With the caveat that no one can provide one-size-fits-all advice for the current situation, here are some suggestions for (1) discerning whether to apply; (2) determining when/where to apply; (3) developing an application.

For those who are considering Wheaton's MA and PhD programs in particular, we very much desire to be in email contact with prospective students, and ideally to receive a visit. Yet some of that time can be better spent if you do some preliminary reflection first.

A PhD is very hard. That's partly due to dysfunctional academic contexts; neither confessionally Christian nor secular university programs in biblical/theological studies are immune to such problems. Ultimately, though, PhD programs are properly difficult because academic life contains distinct challenges, and advanced credentials should reflect that reality. Being a teacher-scholar is full of both profound delights and heavy demands. Those demands are not just arbitrary or dysfunctional, and students often glimpse the delights of an intellectual calling while neglecting its demands. Joy comes when you find that God has called and gifted you for both, so the first step on this journey involves ...

Discerning Whether to Apply

- 1 ***A PhD requires several years and financial sacrifices.*** You'll need supportive family members and friends, along with the infrastructure to handle these costs. (a) Do not be naïve about whether you'll get a traditional academic job once you get the degree. The number of such posts is shrinking considerably, and even "traditional" academic jobs are changing to include more administration and/or elements of hybrid or online teaching. (b) Do not be naïve about how much money you'll make if you get an academic job. You'll probably start out making \$50,000 per year if you're fortunate. Depending on the cost of living where you land, that doesn't leave a lot for paying off loans. (c) Do not be naïve about how much money you'll have during the degree program. Relatively few schools provide significant stipends for students in biblical/theological studies; not all solid schools can even provide free tuition. Often these programs are in expensive metropolitan areas. Students who want to "start a family" at the same time face additional, not just financial, pressures. (These pressures fall particularly on women, whom far too often the academy still accommodates grudgingly. Of course, that problem makes it all the more important for strong female candidates to apply!) It is very uncertain that you'll live "comfortably" during or even after the degree.
- 2 ***A PhD requires other forms of perseverance.*** You'll need a blend of humility and confidence for weathering storms of competition while facing a quantity and quality of work you've never encountered before. After the degree is in sight, you face the job market! (After the job market, you face tenure; after tenure, post-tenure review; etc.)
- 3 ***A PhD requires high academic aptitude.*** You'll need more than just interest in studying more or the ability to get decent grades from your master's level courses. Grade inflation is a common reality that easily misleads you. Most master's level assignments—especially in seminaries—are structured very differently from doctoral level work. Thus many well-meaning applicants have no conception of what a PhD program means by "an original contribution to scholarship" (see below).

- 4 ***A PhD application therefore requires distinguishing features.*** You'll need strong GRE scores (for U.S. programs anyway). If your scores (especially verbal) are in the 90th+ percentile and your analytical writing score is 5.5 or 6.0, then you might be competitive for a top-tier program (e.g., Notre Dame; Princeton Seminary; Duke). If your scores are in the 80th-85th+ percentile and your analytical writing score is at least 5.0, then you might normally be competitive for a second-tier program (e.g., Marquette; Loyola; Wheaton; TEDS). If your scores are significantly below the 75th percentile and your analytical writing score is not at least 4.0 or 4.5, then you should not even bother applying. With less than ideal scores, you might be competitive for some second-tier programs depending on the rest of the applicant class in a given year. Even with ideal scores, such tests are only a threshold through which one passes to start a more competitive process; they are no guarantee of admission unless they are exceedingly high, and then only at certain places.
- 5 ***A PhD requires "counting the cost" in general.*** Hyperbolically: If you can seriously imagine yourself going without a PhD, then consider that possibility! Put differently: Do a PhD if you can't seriously imagine *not* pursuing it—if there is an area of study that you simply have to pursue, and you would be delighted with the formative experience of the PhD *even if you knew that having the credential would never land you an academic job*. The job market suggests that in biblical/theological studies evangelicals do not need more applicants; rather, we need a few truly excellent ones and a more diverse group overall. Churches, meanwhile, need more thoughtful leaders, whether or not they always feel this need: Let the one who has ears, hear. PhD graduates also work in Christian schools, publishing houses, other parachurch organizations, and overseas teaching. The Majority World has some teaching needs, but not always of the quantity or type that "Westerners" expect. Many opportunities stem from a lack of financial support for indigenous teachers; drawing in outsiders may often enhance the training of indigenous leaders, but it also frequently draws in outsiders partly in dependence upon "Western" resources. Getting a PhD for the sake of overseas teaching, or other opportunities besides a traditional academic post, requires keeping in mind the likely need for fund raising and the often stressful circumstances of small Christian organizations.
- 6 Thus, ***a PhD requires realistically considering your particular gifts and opportunities.*** The depressed academic job market has led to somewhat declining PhD applications in biblical and theological studies over the last few years. In general, well-prepared women, ethnic minority, and international graduates—and therefore applicants and students—remain desperately needed. In addition, the ability to sign evangelical confessions faithfully remains a high institutional priority, beyond "on paper" credentials. Therefore it remains possible for truly excellent students of any background to gain admission and later job placement. It is also possible for less-prepared applicants from diverse backgrounds to enter into conversation with schools about how to gain support for better preparation, which could make a subsequent application and PhD experience successful.
- 7 Finally, a bottom line is that ***a PhD requires academic recommendations, and these offer an opportunity for getting meaningful feedback.*** Ask your potential recommenders to provide an honest assessment of your aptitude and opportunities, rather than simply agreeing to write bland, secret reference letters. You need to give them the freedom to speak directly, because—speaking from experience—it is not easy to tell someone with a heart set on a PhD that they're probably not cut out for it. But you need

someone to care for you enough to be as helpful as they can—and it is more helpful to undergo a little blunt trauma quickly than chronic pain later on. (On a positive note, I had a seminary professor voluntarily tell me that I was not well cut out for pastoral ministry in certain respects, whereas “if you don’t go into the academy, you’re wasting your gifts.” If a professor can give you that level of direct feedback, then—again—let the one who has ears, hear.)

Determining When/Where to Apply

- 1 ***Pursue multiple options***, especially if you are applying to strong programs, which typically choose between many candidates with high test scores and significant references. Diversity concerns, balanced supervisor loads, upcoming sabbaticals, etc., affect admission decisions. So don’t apply at just one or two places, unless you have your heart set on something particular and you’re willing to wait or unwilling to settle for alternatives.
- 2 ***Contact one or more potential supervisors at each school***, once you have matched a set of schools to your interests and aptitude. They can steer you in helpful directions for the application process. You might also learn how approachable and available they are.
- 3 ***Prioritize your potential supervisor(s) in selecting the program(s) to which you apply***. While a school’s reputation is important, you are going to apprentice yourself to one or more key people for several years (although in some American programs you don’t have much influence over whom you can get as a supervisor—a factor in its own right). At minimum a supervisor should be open to engaging your theological commitments and intellectual interests. At maximum a supervisor should be a person you would be delighted to imitate in teaching and scholarship ... and even life. Ideally a supervisor’s reputation would make their reference letters useful in the network within which you want a job. It is helpful to visit and/or ask current students how approachable and available a supervisor is. Would this person make you wait six months for feedback on a dissertation chapter? refuse to read your work or meet with you during a sabbatical? Etc. These are real-world and even common scenarios.
- 4 ***Expect no magic formula for knowing when to apply***. Some students need a year or two off, to recharge batteries and avoid burnout, or to experience non-academic ministry, etc. Other students know where they’re going, find academic life energizing, and already get enough breaks over the holidays and the summer, so they should proceed full steam ahead. Do not be naive about how much study and further preparation you’ll achieve in a year or two off; academic accountability structures exist partly because of how ineffective we are on our own. Unless you simply have to improve or gain languages or test scores, for example, and can realistically expect to accomplish that work by yourself, then assume that years off are years academically lost. Do not be naive enough to believe that most successful applicants ever feel academically ready. You can always look around and find someone else smarter or better prepared, because we tend to focus these comparisons on others’ strengths and our own weaknesses.

Developing an Application

In addition to prayer, several other factors in developing a successful application have already surfaced (see #1 through #5). Beyond these, there are three more factors to highlight (see

#6 through #8): your writing sample, your application essays, and your dissertation subject. Some comments about the dissertation subject involve concrete examples and elements that are specific to Wheaton's program.

- 1 **Test scores.** As noted above, test scores usually can't "win it" for you, but there is a minimum to obtain before realistically applying.
- 2 **GPA.** Similarly, due to grade inflation a high GPA can't "win it" for you, but a graduate GPA below 3.5 certainly raises eyebrows for an admissions committee.
- 3 **Recommendations.** In addition to seeking recommenders who know you well and whom others in the field know well (at least by reputation), seek **at least one in your particular academic field** if at all possible.
- 4 **Languages.** Get as many languages in place as strongly as possible.
- 5 **Program nuances and contacts.** Make some preliminary contacts at various schools to initiate relationships with potential supervisors and fellow students, and make sure that your applications reflect the nuances of particular programs.
- 6 **Writing sample.** Pay attention to guidelines, for instance regarding length. Not all schools throw out samples that are too long, but some probably do and others are tempted! Professors on admissions committees have enough grading to do already; they aren't interested in reading tons of papers. They skim the samples of students whose test scores, etc., interest them. They look at intros and conclusions to see if you can set forth a clear thesis and plausible, cogent arguments. They look briefly at the middle to see if you cite a range of good sources, and if you cite enough to be scholarly but not so much that you parrot others and demonstrate no creative thought of your own. If you provide a document that adheres to no style/format guide, and/or is replete with spelling and grammar errors, expect your application to go no farther. Ideally your writing sample bears some significant relation to the proposed subject of your doctoral research. (Many theology applicants send Wheaton writing samples of biblical exegesis. To be sure, this is an essential theological skill. But it is not the whole of the enterprise, and it is difficult on that basis alone to discern whether a student has aptitude for the tasks of historical or especially systematic theology.)
- 7 **Application essays.** It is possible to cut and paste considerable amounts of text between various applications, but again do not neglect the nuances of particular programs. Application essays are your chance to "spin" yourself—honestly. If you have one or more perceived deficiencies, these essays offer a chance to interpret them for the committee. For instance, if you got a C in first-semester Greek, was this due to bad language aptitude? or instead to family trauma, acclimation to seminary, too many credit hours, etc.?
- 8 **Dissertation subject.** For certain programs—especially in the U.K. and at Wheaton, with its attempt at a hybrid U.S./U.K. model—your proposed research agenda is very important. (Even at other programs, the ability to find a dissertation area worth exploring can be an indicator of whether or not you're called or ready to do a PhD.) You don't want to have a dissertation proposal so entirely worked out that the school/supervisor would have no room for input. Yet you don't want to convey that you have little idea of what you're doing. Some schools/supervisors use this weeding-out mechanism: One famous British New Testament scholar told me that whether or not an applicant could find a good thesis topic on their own was a crucial test for deserving admission. Others are more willing—indeed, prefer—to have the process be somewhat dialogical, especially in the year of application. The applicant states a fairly broad area of interest and the

professor gives a hint or two about how to focus it; then the applicant writes again with a more focused version, with the professor giving a “right-track” or “wrong-track” response before the final application, etc. Wheaton fits this latter model more than the former: **We do want to hear from applicants at least once in advance.**

Some initial emails indicate that applicants are so unfamiliar with the concept of writing a dissertation that supervisors basically cross them off their mental list of serious prospects. Other initial emails are so broad (“I want to write on theological hermeneutics; what topics interest you to supervise?”) that supervisors can’t imagine a helpful step for moving from (very broad) A to (narrower) B. So the following paragraphs contain extended reflections on developing a proposed dissertation subject, tailored to Wheaton’s program but with elements that are transferable to other contexts.

A good initial email has some focus (e.g., “I want to engage dogmatically a key biblical-theological theme about readers of Scripture”) and may even propose a couple of options (e.g., “I want to work on a theology of an intellectual virtue or vice, such as humility or curiosity” or “I want to work on a contemporary dispute in Jonathan Edwards studies, such as his doctrine of justification, and want to approach it in terms of how it relates to whether he had a dispositional ontology or in terms of how his unexamined sermons shed light on it”). In an even more ideal world, you have a preliminary angle for starting a project (e.g., my key theme for readers of Scripture involves royal priesthood; or, my key angle on intellectual humility involves Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine re the Incarnation—those are real examples).

(BTW, many evangelical students become interested in biblical theology and/or narrative approaches. As a result they propose to throw out more traditional systematic theology or “dogmatic” approaches and to develop a “whole-Bible” redemptive-historical synthesis on a subject. That approach is almost never possible within the narrow scope of a dissertation. It usually reflects inadequate appreciation of systematic theology as an academic discipline, of what counts as a contribution to scholarship therein.)

The first step, then, is recognizing the acceptable scope of a **reading area** for beginning dissertation work. Such a reading area is not simply a subject of interest—say, the arts—but includes a more particular manner of approaching the subject: say, Wolterstorff’s theory of art; the arts and evangelism; the Bible and music; the arts as rhetoric; etc.

(Other students send in writing samples and/or proposals that contain long bibliographies indicating they read extensively within such an area. But these students provide only description—a survey of literary territory. Often they think that such a description—of, say, a biblical narrative approach to the arts—would be tremendously helpful to the church. And it might, but it may already have been done in the academy or else such a description would only garner fresh interest if it came from an established scholar. Sometimes master’s theses don’t go much farther than basic description either; their argument is not “original” in the doctoral sense, but rather consists in analyzing the state of scholarship on a question.)

A PhD dissertation must press on toward a final goal: a **research question** that either no one has asked before, or else no one has answered satisfactorily, or about which people currently disagree, or about which people have not talked in a while. (In this regard see helpful guides such as Booth/Colomb/Williams’s *The Craft of Research*. An especially useful resource is Graff/Birkenstein’s “*They Say/I Say*”—run, don’t walk, to get it if you struggle in this area!)

You cannot read everything relevant to an area before framing a research question, let alone writing a dissertation. Yet you must do significant reconnaissance: What may help the move from a reading area to a research question is a second step: understanding the **disciplinary structure** of academic organization. Reading areas may overlap with several

academic disciplines or subdisciplines. An original contribution to scholarship answers a research question about a reading area from a particular methodological perspective and for a particular disciplinary audience, even if still others might be interested. Thus, if you propose to “describe” or “analyze” Wolterstorff’s theory of art in some new fashion, your project is a “historical” one; if you propose to “appropriate” or “apply” Wolterstorff’s theory of art in some new fashion, your project is a more “systematic” or “constructive” one. Of course these are fuzzy boundaries, as indicated by the way a task like “evaluate” falls in the middle, but boundaries they are—at least in the academy.

Accordingly, your thesis proposal needs to take a related third step: the **primary method(s)** by which you can answer a research question for a given discipline in a distinctive way. At a broad level, to describe/analyze Wolterstorff’s theory of art is of interest in the field of “historical theology.” However, it might also be of interest within a larger project of “systematic theology,” if for example you need a theory of art as action to form part of your approach to the role of the arts in evangelism. The crucial issue is which methods will be convincing to what audiences at what parts of your thesis: if historical methods, what kind (archival work? textual analysis? social history? etc.)? if systematic methods, how will historical study factor into your conceptual analysis and constructive arguments? Etc.

In the discipline of **systematic theology**, the descriptive/analytic work that some call “history of doctrine” can be a major component of a project. But usually you need to press on, developing implications of the new historical understanding. Let’s say you establish what Wolterstorff says: So what? Is he right? And on what basis? What new insight does he provide relative to others’ approaches or in this new area of conversation?

The upshot is that (for Wheaton or British schools) your application cannot simply identify a dissertation reading area, even if you probably are not yet able to prepare a fully developed research question. In between the first step and the final goal, however, you want to demonstrate that you have done enough reconnaissance to know who some major players are and what major issue you want to tackle. A research question will emerge more fully formed once you discern the primary method(s) by which you contribute to the discipline of systematic theology. **At the application stage, you should try to indicate** *that what you’re proposing has not yet been done or needs to be done anew or at the very least contains areas for further exploration in which to find such a proposed focus.* So, for instance, if there were several analyses of Wolterstorff’s theory of art, but few or no instances of its application to the arts in evangelism, is that a more specific project worth a dissertation, or only a journal article? If the latter, can you find a way of expanding the material—via other authors, a fuller defense of the theory dealing with Scripture and/or recent responses to Wolterstorff, implications for concrete practices, or perhaps expansion from evangelism to a broader motif such as mission or the church’s cultural engagement?

If the expectations for a viable project remain fuzzy for you, then a fourth step would be obtaining (via interlibrary loan if necessary) **sample dissertations to examine**—ideally from the school(s) and supervisor(s) in question. Read renowned books in your field, especially for their structure and methodological setup—ideally books that began life as dissertations. Accept the fact that most of your master’s level papers—and maybe even a thesis—did not demand the kind of contribution a dissertation makes. Sit still with scratch paper—and think creatively at random moments—about your own approach to material before or alongside dealing mostly descriptively with what others give you. Dissertations don’t leave analytical exposition behind, but they gain size and scope via argumentative summaries and transitions that stitch descriptive analysis together with some creative insight.

Such insights may seem quite modest relative to the time and paper devoted to the

project. Yet even the dissertation legwork involved in proving what is fairly predictable or obvious may constitute a creative contribution, because these contributions are not made simply to a subject area but to **the state of scholarship on a given subject area**.

These reflections supplement other helpful advice on PhD application processes, e.g. from <http://seanmichaellucas.blogspot.com/2008/05/ministerial-students-calling-and-phd.html> ; <https://cruxsolablog.com/phd-advice/> (and, in tandem, a useful book) ; and <http://www.johnstackhouse.com/thinking-about-a-phd/>.