

EDITORIAL

Someone said at last year’s Wimbledon final that if one were to design the perfect tennis player, the likely result would be Roger Federer. Indeed, his grace and elegance, his virtually inexhaustible repertoire of shot-making, and his mental toughness, to mention but a few of his remarkable attributes, make him the ideal tennis artist and genius. When I heard that comment, the thought crossed my mind, “What would be the outcome if one were to try to design the perfect scholar?” I’ll leave it up to you to determine if a real-life embodiment of such a creature already exists. But if you would, please indulge me for a few moments in a thought experiment. Let’s sketch a portrait of the perfect scholar and reflect on some of the virtues and characteristics such a person would likely possess. In what follows, I will briefly discuss what you may call “The Eight Pillars of Scholarly Excellence” (thought doubtless more could be added).

The first such pillar is a deep and abiding *love for God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. No doubt this love would be fueled by profound gratitude for what God has done for them in Christ. There would be a recognition of one’s own sinfulness and need for salvation, and the faith that this deliverance from the bondage to sin and death was accomplished in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. There would be an appreciation for the way in which the three persons of the Trinity worked together in tandem to accomplish this salvation, resulting in a deep love for God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and the work each of them has done (or is doing) in creation, salvation, and sanctification. You find this appreciation expressed in the opening of Peter’s first letter which he addressed to those “chosen according to the foreknowledge of *God the Father*, through the sanctifying work of the *Spirit*, to be obedient and to be sprinkled with the blood of *Jesus Christ*” (1 Pet. 1:1–2).

Second, you would find in the perfect scholar a deep and abiding *love for God’s Word*. Such love would be grounded in the confession of God’s Word as inerrant, inspired, authoritative, and wholly trustworthy. It would involve not merely intellectual assent but also volitional affection for the truthfulness, beauty, and power of the divine inscripturated Word. It would entail doctrinal fidelity and orthodox confession, to be sure, but in addition would delight itself in God’s Word, as the psalmist repeatedly and continually exhibits when he says that “his delight is in the LORD’s instruction, and he meditates on it day and night,” so that “he is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers” (Ps 1:2–3 CSB). He would celebrate that God’s Word is perfect, trustworthy, right, radiant, pure, reliable, and exceedingly precious, even sweeter than honey (Ps 19:7–11). For him, explaining God’s Word and writing about it would be grounded in a deep personal relationship with the God of this Word, and in obedience to that God in his heart day by day. Like David, he would be “a man after God’s own heart.”

Third, such a person would be sustained by a deep *appreciation for God's design for man and woman*. I am aware that this is a controversial subject, but probably many (if not most) would agree it is a vital topic. That's why there is so much controversy surrounding it! My wife and I have articulated our understanding of the biblical teaching on this topic in our book *God's Design for Man and Woman*, among other publications. In that volume we seek to show that God's design for man and woman is beautiful, wise, and good, and consistent and coherent throughout Scripture. From Genesis to Revelation, we find in Scripture a dual pattern, male leadership as well as male-female partnership, and we go astray to the extent that we overplay one while diminishing the other. As Paul observes repeatedly, grounding his instruction in OT teaching, God made the man first, and then the woman; this created order implies male leadership, to be exercised in a loving, sacrificial, and selfless manner for the good of the woman. And as we read already in the opening chapter of Genesis, God gave to the man and the woman jointly the command to multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, having made both of them in his image as his divinely fashioned and commissioned representatives.

Fourth, the perfect scholar will exhibit a *humble recognition of his own limitations, fallibility, and finitude*. In his younger years, an aspiring or rising scholar may feel invincible. He may publish his dissertation, and his first monograph or two, and be viewed as a rising star by many in the guild. But invincible and infallible he is not, and sooner or later he must come to terms with this if he is to mature as a scholar, and as a person. God has a way of humbling us so that we don't unduly exalt ourselves. Paul had his thorn in the flesh. Job's life was going perfectly until disaster struck. We may be able to project a perfect image on social media, but God knows we're not perfect. Our views are not always "the truth," and as every commentator knows, interpretation is often rendered tenuous by the limited evidence we have as well as by our own blind spots. Also, we may make mistakes, such as I did when I failed to adequately supervise a research assistant many years ago and as a result unwittingly introduced inadequate documentation into a publication, and then a second, related one. But the man of integrity owns up to his shortcomings and finds God to be a God of mercy, forgiveness, and grace.

Fifth, the perfect scholar will have a *love for the church*. Jesus loves the church and gave his life for her. He is the head of the church, and she is his body. The excellent scholar will engage in his academic calling consciously and deliberately within the context of the church. He will seek to serve the church and to equip those who serve in the church with the tools necessary for ministry, teaching, and preaching. His devotion to God will pervade his academic work without allowing piety to serve as a substitute for quality scholarship. He will acknowledge that he has a high view of Scripture even when others may label him a "confessional scholar" and attach a derogative sense to the label. He will be actively involved in his local church and exercise his spiritual gifts as any other believer. He will be glad to speak in a local church context to undergird the ministry of the resident leadership. He will also seek to encourage his pastor and the leaders of his church and affirm them in their ministry. In all these and other ways, he will demonstrate love for the church. I once heard after the passing of a world-renowned scholar that he had

only rarely gone to church. As followers of the one who affirmed that he would build his church, we will want to do better.

Sixth, the perfect scholar will be *missions-minded*. I have recently had the privilege of revising my volume *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*, almost twenty years after its original publication. In fact, I wrote whole chapters from scratch and radically restructured the entire presentation (the volume is due out in August). I am deeply grateful for this opportunity, as it reminded me how, as Christopher Wright has shown, mission is an integral part of the grand biblical narrative. It is first and foremost *God's* mission of lovingly, relentlessly, and redemptively pursuing sinful humanity that we see expressed in Scripture. Secondly, we find, perhaps surprisingly, that God does not merely offer us salvation in Christ but participation in his mission as well. This is at the same time a great privilege and a serious responsibility. As I engage in scholarly research and writing, am I stirred by love for those who have yet to trust Christ? Am I profoundly aware that the only thing that separates me from an unsaved person is the grace of God in my life? And do I give tangible expression to my commitment to mission in the way I live and allocate my resources?

Seventh, the perfect scholar will exhibit *solid scholarly craftsmanship*. There is an inevitable need for professionalism, technical expertise, and proper research and writing skills that identify a given scholar as a true master of his craft. This is similar to other professions which call for vocational excellence, whether in the medical field, engineering, music, or sports. I have written about various Christian virtues and types of excellence in my book *Excellence: The Character of God and the Pursuit of Christian Virtue*. In the compass of a short editorial, I cannot repeat what I said there, but this book may serve as a useful supplement and magnification of what I am trying to say here. How does one develop in this area? There is no substitute for formal theological education. Also, as virtues are often better caught than taught, it is highly advisable that aspiring scholars find themselves one or several mentors, scholars who excel in their field, and emulate their example. If you're a more seasoned scholar, mentor others and pass on to them what you've learned. Indeed, it is a great privilege to be called to be a scholar and to equip others in the church to love and obey God's word as we serve God with all our heart, mind, strength, and soul.

The eighth and final pillar of scholarly excellence I would like to discuss briefly here are the twin virtues of *creativity* and *eloquence*. Again, I discuss those virtues in my book on excellence. I highlight them here because I believe that they are often overlooked. I come from a musical family. My sister Dorice was the first female violinist in the history of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and has played in this orchestra for more than thirty years. I, too, studied piano performance at the Vienna Academy for Music and Fine Arts for several years before my parents prevailed upon me to pursue a "more practical" occupation. Little did they know I would later find myself called to become a scholar and theologian! I say all of this to make the simple point that God has given to some, such as my sister, a special creative gift. While everyone can learn how to properly footnote a scholarly source, and master basic writing skills, there remains the intangible element of creativity and

eloquence that can be taught and acquired only to a certain extent. I believe this is what sets truly brilliant scholars apart from the rest of us.

So now you have my portrait of the perfect scholar! Perhaps, as you try to match up the above-discussed characteristics with living scholars, you can identify the real-life scholarly equivalent of a Roger Federer, the perfect tennis player. Perhaps you cannot, which is fine, as the above sketch, like the Proverbs 31 woman, is only an ideal portrait. Nevertheless, I believe that the above sketch of the perfect scholar, like the police sketch of a person of interest, may sufficiently approximate a real individual so that it can have aspirational value for those of us who strive to become better, more Christlike and God-honoring scholars. Among other things, such a scholar will be undergirded by love for Father, Son, and Spirit and a love for God's Word; a commitment to and profound appreciation for God's design for man and woman; a humble recognition of his or her own fallibility and finitude; missions-mindedness; solid scholarly craftsmanship; and, last but not least, creativity and eloquence. May you and I increasingly realize our full God-given potential as we are called to glorify God in the way we research, write, and teach.

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