

A Pastor's Perspective: "Building Biblical Confidence by Attending Conferences"

Someday I would like to write a book entitled, *Confessions of a Bible Conference Junkie: Chasing Schwag, Book Sales, and One More Weekend of Enlightenment*. As a pastor, I come across advertisements for conferences of every stripe—church leadership, missions, theology, church-planting, marriage enrichment, and good old, denominational romps. Finding a conference per week would be no challenge. Fronting the money and getting the green light from my wife is the challenge. So the book idea remains a distant dream.

In the meantime, I am days away from arriving at the 69th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). Unlike other conferences I've experienced (i.e., Catalyst, Momentum), ETS lacks the youthful energy and dazzling performances. ETS is a reading event. It comprises hundreds of scholars who present papers on topics ranging from a theology of mental illness to Anglican heritage to Hebrew morphology to John's puzzle of "grace and truth" (1:14). Some papers have a soporific effect. Others send my mine racing, unlocking new and deep insights to God's word.

Typically, I leave ETS with a stockpile of discounted books—commentaries, leadership helps, and spiritual formation texts—funding my library for a year. Regularly, I leave the conference with a fresh sermon series germinating in my mind for the following calendar year. And always, I leave the meeting refreshed, having enjoyed extensive time with a fellow pastors and peers, whose guilty pleasure is like mine: feasting on biblical truth.

A good conference experience should *not* be the exception. Christian leaders should create time and space on their calendar each year for personal and professional growth. While they are not all created equal, every conference can be beneficial if attendees apply the following principles:

- **Pray ahead for purpose:** Don't attend a conference "just because." Annual conferences can become a trap. Always talk to God ahead, asking Him to speak to your heart, challenge your assumptions, and strengthen your vision for ministry.
- **Go with a group:** The best conference experiences are shared. Sitting with others during a main speaker or workshop provides multiple perspectives when you debrief. Bringing an apprentice offers a mentoring opportunity. Groups reduce fuel and lodging costs.
- **Take copious notes:** Travel with your favorite pen and notebook. Mark up the conference workbook. Taking notes helps retain focus and keep track of action points that allow you to follow up with study, sermon preparation, or ministry ideas.
- **Collect the schwag:** Collect all the schwag your suitcase will allow. Keepsakes serve as visual reminders of personal commitments. For the stuff you don't want, give it away to others; they'll be grateful you thought of them.
- **Identify two or three takeaways:** Conferences can feel overwhelming, like drinking from a firehose. Limit your takeaways to three so you can begin to follow up immediately.
- **Schedule another conference:** As you look at your annual calendar, identify one or two enrichment events you will attend. These mini-sabbaticals breathe new life into us.

Truth be told, I am years from becoming a conference junkie. But every conference—from the annual ETS meeting to the Let's Know the Bible Conference every fall—reinforces their value. They strengthen our spiritual lives.

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