

Introduction

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Reading is so commonplace that we often don't even notice how much of it we do. When we think about reading, we might imagine curling up with a novel next to a roaring fire on a cold winter's night or hunkering down in a library for research. We might picture delighting in a graphic novel on an iPad or a glossy magazine full of advice for better living. Or we might recall the more mundane forms of reading we encounter every day: bills, reports, road signs.

And yet reading extends beyond deciphering marks on a page. We "read" the outdoors, finding there a weather forecast or inspiration. We "read" social situations and discover joy or apprehension. We "read" our friends and family and discern without words their emotional state. In short, reading is a habit as much as it is a practice, a way of life as much as it is an academic skill.

As you ponder your own theological education, reading theologically seems a particularly appropriate starting point. As you embark on this educational journey, you will read books and essays

in preparation for the work of ministry. You will read the Bible, histories, theological reflections, pastoral care resources. But you will also be walking through this experience with fellow students and faculty who will have much to teach you.

Some of what you will read will delight you, confirm your deepest hopes, drive you to new aspirations, and perhaps even help you encounter God in powerful ways. At other times, you will read texts and encounter ideas that will disturb you, shake you to your core, lead you to question and doubt much of what you have held dear. Both are indispensable experiences of reading in seminary. Both are necessary. Both will challenge you. Both will be difficult. Yet the moments when reading challenges us—whether by delighting or disturbing us—are precisely the moments when we make our greatest strides in learning.

How to Read This Book

This book is a collaboration of eight theologically-minded scholar-teachers. All eight are exemplary scholars in their particular fields and incisive theologians. Moreover, all are deeply committed to the kind of formative and graceful reading I have been describing, even as we might disagree on a number of issues. In these eight distinct perspectives, you will thus discover a set of shared values about reading theologically. In the ensuing chapters, we emphasize the vital skills, practices, and values involved in reading theologically. However, this is not just a “how-to” book or an instruction manual for how to read. Indeed, you already know quite well how to read. After all, you have been reading these several paragraphs thanks to a lifetime of reading! Instead, we are more concerned with helping you inculcate a particular set of habits around reading that will serve you well in all kinds of ministry settings. What posture do you take

toward those with whom you disagree? How can reading widen your perspective rather than just confirm what you think you know? How can reading transform your spirituality?

Reading is not just an activity of the eyes and the brain. What we mean by reading theologically is a whole mindset and posture toward texts and ideas, people and communities alike. Reading theologically is thus not primarily about mechanics. This book is not principally concerned with *how* we read in seminary. Instead, reading theologically is about the formation and cultivation of a particular posture toward texts, whether sacred or profane. Reading theologically is not just about building your academic skills, but about your formation as a ministerial leader who can engage scholarship critically, interpret scripture and tradition faithfully, welcome different perspectives, and help lead others to do the same. This is your call as a student of theology.

Each contribution in this book will include practical advice about best practices in reading theologically; however, we will also stress why particular reading postures and attitudes are essential for those called to ministry. The essays in this book will invite you to read in many different ways. Each assumes that you, the reader, are considering attending seminary or have already begun your theological education. However, no matter where you are in your discernment, this book will help you think about this critical habit of a lifelong learner. In short, this book will invite you to be a perpetual pupil, a student always unsatisfied with easy answers for difficult questions or simple caricatures of those with whom you disagree.

Why is reading theologically so important? Because the gospel of Jesus Christ demands a radical posture of grace toward ideas and people alike. With a spirit of generosity, we expect God to speak in all kinds of ways through all kinds of people. With conviction and passion we draw upon the scriptures, our traditions, and our

experiences, knowing that God meets us in the everyday sacredness of life. Reading is never just about the collection of data; it is always about the cultivation of a deep wisdom rooted in the Spirit's gracious shaping of our lives.

An Exhortation to the Reader

Let's face it, your education and formation in seminary is not really about books and articles, curricula and programs, tests and essays. Your education is not about stuffing a ton of information in between your ears and being prepared to parrot it back to your teachers. Your education is not about confirming everything you know or rejecting everything you believe. Your education will not just happen in the classroom or in the library.

After all, why are you in seminary? You are pursuing this particular form of education because you were and are called. Right? You are drawn to seminary because God brought family, friends, and mentors into your life who helped kindle your gifts and passions. You are considering theological education because God has called you to serve the world, to preach the good news, to heal the sick, to declare the reign of God's justice. You are in seminary because your classmates need you so that they too might serve the world. You are in seminary because an increasingly diverse world yearns for a word of hope, a violent world yearns for peace, an unjust world yearns for a new king.

So, are you ready?

If you consider the requisite qualifications of a seminarian to be a vast amount of prior knowledge, you are not ready. If you consider the requisite qualifications of a seminarian to be certainty and assurance about all things, you are not ready. If you consider the

requisite qualifications of a seminarian to be a desire to surpass all others in argumentation, you are not ready.

But if you lean on God's call when the work piles up, you are ready. If you learn with a generous heart and listen to your colleagues with genuine curiosity, you are ready. If love is your guide when you read and write and discuss and think and debate, you are ready. And, most importantly, if God has called you to this path, you are ready.

So, are you ready? You are, my friends. You are. Let's get to work. Let's read . . . together.