

*Reading Theologically*  
Edited by Eric D. Barreto

We spend most of our days reading even when we don't notice we are reading. *Reading Theologically* invites people of faith to think deeply about this daily activity. In particular, the essay writers lead us to ask how God is involved in all kinds of reading, whether we are enjoying the morning paper or delving into a wonderful novel or studying a work of theology.

In short, reading is a spiritual practice that we nurture as people of faith.

This book was written with seminarians in mind. However, we have found that clergy and lay people alike will benefit from the reflections found here. After all, every follower of Jesus is called by God to live faithfully, speak boldly about God's love, and serve the needs of others. One of the ways we do all these things is in our reading practices.

So, as you read this book, wonder how your reading helps you to be faithful. How does your reading help you speak boldly about God? How can you read and so serve your neighbors, both near and far?

Below you will find illustrative quotes from each chapter along with discussion questions; both can prime rich discussions around these chapters.

Our hope is that your reflections on *Reading Theologically* will help nurture people of faith to read with care, with grace, with hope, with a critical eye, with generosity.

Reading in this way is counter-cultural but also characteristic of a people touched by God's mighty and gentle grace.

*Introduction, by Eric D. Barreto*

"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." (p. 4)

1. In what way do you feel called by God? To what is God calling you today?
2. What is your favorite book? What does the book reflect about your life and sense of call?
3. Tell a story about your earliest memory of reading. Was it a difficult story? A story about joy?
4. What do you read most today? Novels? Internet posts? Newspapers? Nothing at all? Why do you read what you choose to read?

### Chapter 1: Reading Basically, by Melissa Browning

“Your studies should transform you. They should inspire you to live out your calling and equip you to be a witness to God’s transforming of the world. But this type of learning requires more than showing up. It demands an active commitment on the part of the learner to be transformed.” (p. 20)

1. What new things did you discover about reading in college or your career?
2. Share about how you read most of the time. Do you read while reclining in your bed? Is there a chair you save especially for reading? Do you read on planes? Do you enjoy audio books in your car? Why or why not?
3. Who are you “collaborators” in your reading? That is, who shapes what you read? Who influences your choices in books and articles? To whom do you feel accountable when you read?
4. bell hooks argues that “the classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy.” Has that been your experience in your education?

### Chapter 2: Reading Meaningfully, by Miriam Y. Perkins

“Interpretation is deliberative exploration and creative expression of fruitful encounter.” (p. 22)

1. What do you already know about reading? That is, what were you taught about what happens when you read? What have you experienced when you read?
2. Think about a story or book that can be interpreted in many different ways. For instance, many watchers of the TV show *The Sopranos* have been debating for years what happened in its cryptic ending. Why do you think a writer would choose an ending with so much ambiguity?
3. The essay concludes with three “postures” of ministry:
  1. “... meaningful interpretation is the practice of *listening with openness*.”
  2. “... meaningful interpretation is *seeking truth that has clarity and flexibility*.”
  3. “... meaningful interpretation is *maturing into patient hope and humble endurance*.”Which of these three feels most significant to you today?

### Chapter 3: Reading Biblically, by Amy L.B. Peeler

“... because [Scripture] is living and active, we soon realize that we are being studied by it. Scripture never remains a mere object; it becomes an agent.... To read the Bible theologically is to read humbly, ready to have Scripture challenge you even as you endeavor to investigate it.” (pp. 39-40)

1. What is your favorite passage of Scripture? Tell a story that explains the importance of this text in your life.
2. Who has shaped your reading of the Bible most? What people in your life help guide your reading of Scripture even if they are not present with you?
3. How has God spoken to you in your reading of the Bible?

Chapter 4: Reading Generously, by Gerald C. Liu

“Put another way, generous reading occurs when we give time and attention to texts in such a way that genuine interest for them never seems far away. Developing genuine interest does not require pretending that we enjoy or agree with everything we read.... Moving to a theological register, a key for developing genuine interest as a genuine reader lies in the ability to rely upon and offer the peace of God especially in those encounters where we feel unsettled or even disturbed by the authors we read.” (p. 62)

1. What sources of information do you trust most when you read? What allows you to trust these sources?
2. Dr. Liu starts by saying, “Reading generously is a practice of love.” How do we love God and neighbor in the ways we read?
3. How did you react to Jeff Chu’s interaction with the people of Westboro Baptist? Were you troubled by his story? Moved by it?
4. What community of readers would most challenge your sense of generosity?

Chapter 5: Reading Critically, by Jacob D. Myers

“... I would suggest that you treat critical reading as you would garlic in a fine spaghetti sauce: just the right amount can draw out the richness of the other ingredients, but too much will ruin it.” (pp. 82-83)

1. What “ideologies” most shape the way you read? That is, what stories about the world and what assumptions about the world most influence how you understand what you read?
2. How might you discern hidden ideologies that are affecting you without your conscious knowledge? For instance, in what ways have assumptions about race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religion molded your life?
3. Do you tend to be a “confrontational” or “peaceable” reader? How do you nurture both this tendency as well as its opposite?

Chapter 6: Reading Differently, by James W. McCarty III

“Context matters. We can understand the words and actions of others only with knowledge of the contexts in which those words were spoken and those actions taken.... A parallel principle holds in theology. To do theology well, then, requires the ability to think with people in different contexts.” (p. 84)

1. Name a time when shifting your context has changed how you understand something. You could discuss an experience with international travel that opened your eyes or a friendship with someone from a different culture.
2. What do you think it looks like when we think “*with*” others instead of “*above*” or “*against*” them (see pp. 91-92)?
3. What does it mean for you to practice “theological humility” (p. 92)? What does that look like in practice?

Chapter 7: Reading Digitally, by Sarah Morice Brubaker

“Faithful digital reading is a celebration of the blessings of digital communication: its inclusiveness, its opportunities for community-forming, the way it allows marginalized voices to gain hearers. But faithful reading also requires us to challenge the vices of digital communication: the virtual yelling, the bloviating, the low standards of evidence, and the free rein given to confirmation bias.” (p. 108)

1. How have the internet, social media, cellphones, Kindles, and other digital forms of communication changed how you read?
2. In what ways have you seen confirmation bias working in you or your friends online? How do you combat it in your own life?
3. What “analog practices for reading digitally” (pp. 108-111) do you plan to take up over the next week? Think about sharing that commitment on your Facebook page or as a tweet.

Chapter 8: Reading Spiritually, by Shanell T. Smith

“And when all is said and done, teach others what you have learned. Share what you have acquired so that the religious community you serve can be uplifted and better equipped to carry out God’s ministry. After all, what good is learning how to read spiritually if you keep it to yourself?” (p. 123)

1. Share about a time when reading something elevated your spirit. Or share about a time when reading something stirred your spirit into action.
2. What part of Dr. Smith’s “S.o. W.h.a.t.?” method do you find most challenging? Why?
3. What will you share about this book with a friend? What have you learned that will most affect how you live faithfully today?

Don’t forget to check out *Thinking Theology* in January 2015 and *Writing Theologically* in the second quarter of 2015.