

Review

Eilers, Kent. *Reading Theology Wisely: A Practical Introduction*. Art by Chris Koelle. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022. Pp. 217. ISBN 9780802881786

By Jonathan Numada, PhD

Kent Eilers, Professor of Theology at Huntington University, Fort Wayne, Indiana, has written an accessible volume that will be useful for lay audiences and some undergraduate teaching contexts. This book was a finalist for *Christianity Today's* 2023 award for Book of the Year in Theology (popular level). While the author provides some brief orientation to the field of theology, the book is primarily written with an eye to introducing a certain philosophy of reading and focuses on the less tangible aspects of what Eilers labels “wisdom.” The book’s main concern is primarily the encouragement of spiritual reflection and the practice of empathy when engaging theological literature. Eilers recognizes the need for theological critiques but is more interested in the foundational task of motivating people to value theological works of all types.

Chapter 1 discusses how the act of reading a text intersects with theology. “Reading theology is a living encounter with an author’s world of meaning, as fellow members of the church who are being conformed to Christ’s image” (5). Though some “worlds of meaning” can be false, Eilers urges his audience to grant theological works sympathetic readings that give due consideration to a writer’s ideas (10-11). Eilers devotes significant attention to the affective domain, describing theology as not only systems of propositions but also as a reflection of a person’s theological identity. He closely associates reading theology with personal discipleship and transformation. Readers with backgrounds in literature may recognize that Eilers advocates approaching theology similar to how one reads fiction: he argues people read theology to imagine the possible, and they should allow this practice to shape them and prompt them to reflect upon new and different ways of understanding of God and his relationship to creation.

Chapter 2 outlines Eilers’ “vision for theology,” or what some would consider theology’s main task. Again, the author broadens theology’s scope beyond considering the propositional to include an encounter with a reality beyond the human ability to fully comprehend or articulate, but which is facilitated through reading the work of others (25-29). Consequently, encounter with God through written communication and personal reflection must by necessity transform the individual. Since all creation originates in and relates to God, the character of God as described by theology has implications for how one understands any topic (30-33).

Chapter 3 returns to the nature of reading, where Eilers advances what he calls the “inhabitation” of theological texts as opposed to a cold analysis of ideas (50). While the language and metaphors used in his argument appear to be simple, the undergirding concepts with which the author is working are quite sophisticated. In this chapter the author engages disaffection with aspects of the modernist or post-enlightenment paradigm that sees ideas as tools to be grasped and manipulated for personal benefit. He also draws upon conversations in the social sciences about the social construction of space, space in this case being a metaphorical place created by art and literature for amicable discussion of ideas (54). Eilers further describes the cognitive aspects of reading, where a reader mentally reconstructs the realities described by texts to approximate meaning (61-63). Because much of what happens when a person is reading is phenomenological and unique to every individual, it follows there is usually an amount of subjectivity in how any text is understood. For the author this means that readers must give sympathetic consideration of the writings and ideas of people who engage in theological reflection.

Chapter 4, “Settings of Theology: Behind the Page,” outlines how language and culture can influence a theological writer. Much of the chapter relates to foundational hermeneutical matters, such as accounting for an individual’s personality, the frames of reference and values they draw upon, and the iterative, contextually embedded nature of communication. Eilers also recounts the emergence of theology as an independent academic discipline and its influence on popular perceptions of doing theology (87-89). The author notes that prior to the nineteenth century theology retained a spiritual, church-directed focus that valued a thinker’s personal character. Its incorporation into modern university curricula shifted the emphasis to intellectually focused factors such as comprehensiveness and coherence. This chapter includes helpful discussions about how disagreement does not compel a person to reject another party’s Christian identity (92). In cases where heterodoxy is clear, Eilers still encourages sympathetic readings of heretical authors because they are valuable for increasing awareness about the foundations of our own theological systems and avoiding similar doctrinal mistakes (92-96).

Chapter 5, the first of two “of the Page” chapters, provides an overview of the resources that serve as the foundation to Christian theological systems. It describes the roles Scripture, Tradition, Experience, Reason, and Culture play in shaping theological beliefs. For the most part this chapter is strongly oriented to evangelical traditions and advocates a more developed version of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (109-116). The author invokes the notion of a “communication space” where people draw upon the above resources to communally reflect upon theology (124).

Chapter 6, the second “of the Page” discussions, summarizes the different theological subdisciplines and their modes of expression (130-149). Sometimes in

this chapter the author blends the lines between the content of theology and how it is expressed or communicated. For example, Eilers categorizes prayer on the one hand, and systems of doctrine on the other, as forms of theology alongside one another. It is true that both are genres for expressing beliefs. But if theology is taken to be a set of convictions or beliefs, with these serving as a resource for how and what one communicates about God, then placing things like prayers, treatises, and systems of doctrine in the same category may sometimes be inappropriate. That said, Eilers is correct in arguing that theology permeates far more of human existence than the latent secularizing influences of western culture might prompt one to acknowledge.

The final chapter returns to the practice of reading with a renewed emphasis upon practicing discernment and empathy. Eilers outlines four “rules” to practice when reading: the Rule of Scripture, the Rule of Faith, the Rule of Love, and the Rule of Prayer (170-177). The rule of Scripture refers to the Bible’s normative function, while the Rule of Faith refers to other normative Christian traditional elements such as the historic creeds. Likewise, the Rule of Love functions as a litmus test for a theology’s validity: does it promote love of God and others? The Rule of Prayer functions similarly as to whether a theological work or mode of expression promotes greater attentiveness to and alignment with God. The author outlines three virtues required for reading theology: receptivity, hospitality, and empathy (177-182). These are expressed by exercising a “rational compassion” (183) that allows one to meaningfully consider and discern the value of an author’s belief system as communicated in a work. Failure to practice these virtues risks making the reader vulnerable to a form of self-deception that makes them more vulnerable to their own set of false beliefs and negative cultural influences (186-187). The book concludes with a final appeal for readers to practice sympathy when engaging theological ideas in works that they encounter.

Reading Theology Wisely is an accessible book. Its language and style are sometimes heavy on metaphor and almost mediative in tone, with artwork by collaborator Chris Koelle throughout. The manuscript is clean but sometimes the phrasing is unclear and borders on ungrammatical (“the studier finds herself to be the one studied” [28]). The book uses endnotes rather than footnotes, which is appropriate for the audience but makes consulting the citations less convenient. Each chapter follows a common pattern: introduction, closing prayer, concluding summary, reflection questions, and learning activities (“Theology Lab”). The main body of each chapter is clearly written, and the concluding summaries are short but helpful. The reflection questions are suitable for personal and small group use but are of uneven suitability for classroom settings. The learning activities alternate between reflections for individual readers and small group discussion. Some of these

could serve as inspiration for course assignments. The concluding prayers contribute a helpful spiritual tone to the book and are useful reminders that theological reflection must coincide with prayer. The labels “the world *behind* the page,” “*of* the page,” and “*in front of* the page” speak of the different roles of the author and their context, the textual medium itself, and the person and environment of the reader. One wonders if this is an epistemological or hermeneutical observation rather than a theological perspective, but this approach does shed light on why reading and reflecting upon written communication can be so subjective.

Reading Theology Wisely provides a helpful counterbalance to intellectual superiority or cynicism. It is ideal for those who do not have an academic background in theology but are interested in theological reflection, or who seek to integrate theological reflection with art, the spiritual disciplines, or other facets of life. This book is not intended for teaching specific theological traditions, subdisciplines, schools, or methods. Instructors might find it a useful foil alongside a more academic textbook at the undergraduate level.

The author has succeeded in producing a deeply intellectual book that does not read like one, hopefully broadening interest in theology among non-specialists. The author responds well to Christian anti-intellectualism: “reading theology is ... mistaken for dry intellectualism and thus irrelevant ... or even harmful ... [b]ut what if reading theology was about ... moving us *closer* to our true selves in Christ, *seeing* our neighbors more as Jesus does, and *propelling* us into God’s works of justice and mercy?” (ix, italics original). Perhaps the most significant contribution of *Reading Theology Wisely* is found in its continuous exhortations for Christians to avoid polarization through the practice love, discernment, and permitting space for disagreement. The metaphor of inhabitation may seem strange when applied to reading theological works, but it has the virtue of reminding Christians that when theological disputes have passed and the divisive questions have been settled, they will remain inhabitants of this world as they seek to spread the gospel of peace.

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