

## Review

Benjamin L. Merkle and Adrienne Cheek Miles. *Christian Academic Writing: Twelve Practices and Principles for Becoming a Successful Writer*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2024. 176 Pages ISBN 9781540965998

By Joel Houston, PhD

Benjamin L. Merkle (Dr. M.O. Owens Jr. Chair of New Testament Studies at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) and Adrienne Cheek Miles (Associate Professor of English and Linguistics at also at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) have written a short, accessible guide to writing within the world of Christian academic publishing. Instead of “a manual for research, writing, and publishing” Merkle and Miles have instead offered a book “full of practical and proven advice to help you with your writing projects” (xi). The book is composed of 12 chapters, three appendices, and an annotated bibliography of similar works. Each chapter is written as a kind of exhortation to the reader: *e.g.* “Love Your Topics,” “Bust Your Writing-Related Myths,” “Solicit Feedback,” and beyond writing, “Participate in Professional Conferences,” etc. Each chapter concludes with thoughtful questions and space for written reflections by the reader. The appendices are helpful lists of academic religious publishers, academic journals, and religious academic organizations. The book concludes with an annotated bibliography for readers who would like to explore more works dedicated to the craft of (especially) academic writing.

Part of what makes this book work well is the alternating perspectives from both Merkle and Miles. Academics positioned at different stages of their career, they offer valuable insights into how to hone the discipline and skills necessary to write well, but also, how to structure one’s day (and even life!) prioritizing consistent writing practices. The dual-authored writing of the book flows well, and on occasion when either Merkle or Miles identifies themselves as the sole author it feels unforced and even functions as a welcome personal note. This helps the reader feel as though they are receiving advice from a mentor or friend, instead of orders or dictates from an uninterested andragogue. This book would be especially helpful for late-stage advanced degree students and early career academics, once the guardrails of a PhD program have come off. But truly, the measure of the usefulness of such a book as this is the degree to which the reader puts the advice and practices contained in the chapters to actual effect. To be sure, both Merkle and Miles, by sharing their own

experiences with writing (and the conclusions they have come to and share in this book), are proof-positive that their advice is sound.

Two criticisms remain for this work, however. The first is (and as the annotated bibliography demonstrates), of what need is yet another book on writing practices? The market has a sizeable amount of works dedicated to just such a topic, and they all encounter the same challenge: how to motivate the reader to apply the principles discussed in the book. To be sure, the basic motivation exists: follow this advice, and the result will be good work, on time, and maybe even in advance of deadlines. Yet addressing the human element, which makes writing so maddeningly frustrating, is lacking in this work. It, at times, feels as though Merkle and Miles overlook the frustration of writing, or acknowledge it in passing. They do not have much to say about the psychological, spiritual, or emotional roadblocks to writing that cannot be addressed through advice about writing. Consequently, the principles in this book run the same risk as advice of any kind: easy to dispense, hard to apply.

However, one might rightly counter, the value that this book holds is that it is a book on *Christian* academic writing. At this juncture *Christian Academic Writing* suffers from the scourge of some Christian publishing houses over the past few decades: books that are purportedly to be oriented towards the content of the Christian faith (Christ and him crucified) but upon examination do not have very much that is distinctly Christian at all. This is not to dispute the sincerity and faith of Miles and Merkle. But this book feels a bit as though one thing is on offer (what it means to write academic literature as a *Christian*), but in fact it is more about how to write well and market to academic publishers that target a Christian audience. From the title to the blurbs on the book, largely scholars of the Bible and theologians like Michael Bird, Karen Swallow Prior, Chris Morgan and Michael Kibbe), the impression that may come across is that there is far more content related to Christian spirituality, theology, or the Bible than there is. For some, this will be a drawback, others, not at all.

In conclusion, Merkle and Miles have written a good book; a practicable handbook for students and scholars who are looking to hone their craft as a writer. More, they leverage their experience publishing in the Christian academic world to gently guide students towards other books on writing, Christian academic publishers, and conferences where they may promote their ideas and their writings. The book

suffers somewhat in that it does not address the question of how best to overcome the inertia that besets all writers, nor does it have fulsome guidance about what it means to write academic literature *as a Christian*—but again, it just might not be that kind of book.

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Joel Houston, review of *Christian Academic Writing: Twelve Practices and Principles for Becoming a Successful Writer*, Benjamin L. Merkle and Adrianne Cheek Miles, Northwest Institute for Ministry Education Research, [www.nimer.ca](http://www.nimer.ca) n Research, [www.nimer.ca](http://www.nimer.ca) (May 23, 2025).