

How to Read **THEOLOGY**

Engaging Doctrine
Critically and Charitably

UCHE ANIZOR



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To Dan Treier,
a model of the critical yet charitable reader

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Prologue

What Kind of Book Is This?

Mark Twain once wrote a letter to his close friend Reverend J. H. Twichell, reacting to a borrowed copy of Jonathan Edwards’s great work *The Freedom of the Will*. In it Twain confesses, “I wallowed and reeked with Jonathan in his insane debauch; rose immediately refreshed and fine at 10 this morning, but with a strange and haunting sense of having been on a three days’ tear with a drunken lunatic. . . . All through the book is the glare of a resplendent intellect gone mad—a marvelous spectacle. . . . By God I was ashamed to be in such company.”¹

What strong words about America’s greatest theologian! Is this reaction warranted? Twain responds harshly to a Calvinism with which he was familiar and in which he was reared (to some degree as a Presbyterian). Even though he concedes that Edwards makes some sound points, Twain finds the book wanting. He sees in Edwards’s work the signs of brilliance but must ultimately part ways with the

1. Mark Twain, *Mark Twain’s Letters*, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), 719–20. Twain further comments, “No, not *all* through the book—the drunk does not come till the last third, where what I take to be Calvinism and its God begins to show up and shine red and hideous in the glow from the fires of hell, their only right and proper adornment.”

theologian. What Twain illustrates, at the very least, is that theology calls for a considered response, even if one less violent than Twain's.

This book is about *reading* theology. It is for those who want to think carefully about the theology they read and who enjoy the task but are still developing basic skills. As such, it is meant to be a primer to theological texts that introduces readers to the “behind the scenes” happenings in those texts, helping them better grasp the meaning of what exactly they are reading when they read theology. This book is meant to help the students who suddenly realize that they, like Twain, need to make some sort of decision about what they are reading but may not know where to begin. More accurately, then, this book is about *evaluating* theologies. In writing it, I have sought to maximize readers' benefit from theological literature, especially texts with which they may have major disagreements. I am convinced that something special can be gained from most theological texts, but they must be approached the right way—that is, critically *and* charitably. To use a well-worn image, reading theology well involves engaging both your head and your heart.

To that end, the book is divided into two parts. Part 1 is concerned with helping readers foster a charitable disposition toward theological texts. Chapter 1 explores four antilove postures (or “enemies of love”) that get in the way of charitable reading in theology. Chapter 2 contends that since theology is never conducted in a vacuum, some knowledge of a theologian's context (or “backstory”) is crucial if we are to judge his or her work fairly. Becoming increasingly familiar with the story of the theologian or their theology will foster a sympathetic and discerning reading.

Part 2 aims to develop skills for reading theology critically. Developing these skills, however, should never be divorced from developing character. Moving from part 1 to part 2 does not signal a departure from charity to focus on critical reading. Rather, charitable reading, as I will suggest, is often the most intelligent reading, and reading is most critical when we attend to another's work closely, carefully, and with sympathy. Critical reading, properly understood, is reading done in love. The chapters comprising part 2 provide tools, but tools in the hands of the unloving can easily become weapons (for pigeonholing, quickly dismissing, and so on). With that in mind,

part 2 explores how theology relates to the other resources we possess: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. Each respective chapter examines how theologians have variously understood the relationship between theology and the resource in question and ultimately asks how these resources might be used as criteria for assessing theologies. Chapter 3 explores scriptural authority, focusing mainly on how to understand how the Bible is used and the authority it has in doctrinal formulation, so as to provide more categories for evaluating whether a theologian or theology is “biblical.” Chapter 4 examines the relationship between theological proposals and the Christian tradition, particularly the importance of knowing the Christian past for evaluating theology past and present. Chapter 5 addresses the question of theology’s rationality—its coherence and cogency. Finally, chapter 6 explores how doctrine and experience should correspond. When we read theology, we should ask at least two questions: (1) How is this theology reflective of the experience of Christians presently or historically? (2) What are the practical or ethical consequences of following this theology? In chapter 6, I discuss experience as an explicit criterion for evaluating doctrine.

To illustrate each of these points, I have sprinkled examples throughout each chapter. I have deliberately kept these examples brief, which seems appropriate given this book’s length. Therefore, it will be up to you, the teachers and readers of this book, to apply the principles herein to your own small samples of theological texts. I present a starting point, a guide for engaging doctrine, not a *summa* on all things related to reading theology. May this guide sharpen your vision that you might see what is there in theological texts, and may it prepare you to engage in the discipline of reading theology with a critical mind and a charitable heart.

PART 1

On Reading CHARITABLY

1

Enemies of Love

The Challenge of Reading Theology Charitably

To read with intelligent charity. . . . To read lovingly because of and in the name of Jesus Christ, who is the author and guarantor of love.

—Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading*

In his final lectures, Karl Barth sums up a lifetime of theological work, memorably describing his vocation in this way: “Evangelical theology is concerned with Immanuel, God with us! Having this God for its object, it can be nothing else but the most thankful and *happy* science.”¹ Those who know the God of the gospel should need no convincing that theology—the contemplation of this God—has great value and is a source of great joy. Yet if we are honest, we recognize that as much as theology is the “happy science” in theory, many do not experience it as such. For example, Helmut Thielicke, in his

1. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 12.

famous *Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, locates the source of unhappiness primarily in the theological student. In a chapter titled “Unhappy Experience with a Theologian’s Homecoming,” he recounts the story of a young seminarian who returns home “horribly changed” after his first semester of formal training. The simple and passionate faith he once had was replaced by hubris resulting from the new and fascinating ideas he has learned. After three semesters he becomes effectively useless for ministry in the church, being unable to condescend to the level of the average layperson. “The inner muscular strength of a lively young Christian,” Thielicke concludes, “is horribly squeezed to death in a formal armor of abstract ideas.”² Pride, immaturity, inexperience—these can convert a happy science into a somewhat suspect discipline. For while the young theologian found some form of joy in theological study, the desired beneficiaries of his learning experienced his joy as misery.

One response to this unhappy state of affairs could be to ignore the supposed cacophony of erudite voices—that is, the study of theology—in favor of the simple melody of Scripture alone. But that option is not available to us. In fact, the happy science must be carried out by theological students of all stripes in learned dialogue with theologians of the past and present. That is, we must *read* theology. Indeed, Barth points out that theological study must consist of at least two conversations: a primary and a secondary. The first involves the student directly engaging with Scripture to discern what God is saying to her and her community in her time. Of the secondary conversation Barth writes, “The student must permit himself indirectly to be given the necessary directions and admonitions for the journey toward the answer which he seeks. Such secondary instructions are gained from theologians of the past, the recent past, and from his immediate antecedents—through examination of their biblical exegesis and dogmatics and their historical and practical inquiries. . . . No one, however, should ever confuse this secondary conversation with the primary one, lest he lose the forest for the trees.”³

2. Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, trans. Charles L. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 7–8.

3. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 174.

We come to know God as we converse with fellow readers of the Bible. Yet this is precisely where another set of problems emerges, not so much for church members (as in Thielicke's tale) as for the practitioners themselves. As a seminary student it was not uncommon for me to encounter a theological text and have absolutely no clue what to make of it. There was a strangeness to it, and it was not always evident how I could profit from it on my journey of faith seeking understanding. This sometimes resulted in frustration: with my professor for assigning such difficult and "unclear" readings, with the writer for being obscure or "unbiblical," and with myself for being dull and "missing something." My situation is not unique. I remember giving a brief lecture on liberation theology to upper-year Bible and theology majors where the students repeatedly asked, "So what?" They were uncertain how these black, feminist, and Latin American theologians could possibly be helpful to them, especially considering that (in their eyes) these theologians offered nothing discernibly biblical, or at least exegetical, in their formulations. Why spend time studying them? A fine question, I think, but somewhat misguided. On the one hand, the students were correct to assume that some writers are better guides into Scripture and the knowledge of God than others. On the other hand, they incorrectly assumed that if the text's value was not self-evident and immediately experienced, the theology had little worth. In light of these concerns, if we are to read theology, how might we engage it profitably?

What has become clear to me is that I, my students, and countless others face several barriers to understanding and assessing theologies well. Some of these challenges are skills-related, while others are tied to disposition. There are indeed things one needs to know and practices in which one needs to be skilled in order to read theology with understanding (and subsequent chapters will go some way in addressing those concerns). But our attitudes also influence how we read theology; they can be productive for or prohibitive to reading theology well, and for our purposes that means reading theology critically *and* charitably, or with "intelligent charity," as Alan Jacobs puts it. In this chapter we will, as a spiritual exercise of sorts, reflect on some dispositional obstacles to this kind of reading, reading that befits an evangelical theologian—one concerned to honor the God of the gospel.

Obstacles to Intelligent Charity

To love God and to love one's neighbor as oneself is an impossible task. Moreover, how does this all-encompassing command intersect with the particular activity of reading theology? Although the meaning of Jesus's twofold love command appears fairly straightforward, it does require some elaboration, particularly if we are to apply it to the act of reading theology.

The attempt to bring this commandment into dialogue with the reading of texts is no new thing. Augustine, applying Christ's twofold love command to the interpretation of Scripture, famously writes, "So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the passage has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar."⁴ The point for Augustine is that a reading of Scripture is good if it *results* in love for God and neighbor. Love is not primarily the disposition or driving motivation in reading but more the outcome of proper interpretation, even if the interpretation is de facto wrong. Alan Jacobs, in *A Theology of Reading*, extends Augustine's inquiry into the field of literary hermeneutics, asking how Jesus's command might shape our reading of literature. What might it look like to read with "intelligent charity"? he queries.⁵ His essay is an extended theological reflection on the obstacles and challenges to, and the promise of, reading texts charitably. My concern, building on Jacobs, is to narrow the focus of such an inquiry to the field of *theological* literature.

Some contemporary philosophers also attempt to delineate a "principle of charity" for their discipline, consisting of tenets that encourage us to, for example, understand a point of view in its strongest form, assume coherence, and attempt to resolve apparent contradictions.⁶

4. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. and ed. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 27.

5. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, Co: Westview, 2001), 9–11.

6. George Hunsinger helpfully summarizes some of the philosophical literature on the principle of charity and applies it to the reading of Barth. See George Hunsinger,

While quite helpful, these principles may not be radical enough. The love of neighbor that Jesus enjoins us to practice is a reflection of God’s love for us, revealed in Christ’s self-offering. This love involves giving oneself to another, intentionally pursuing another’s good with no expectation of reciprocation.⁷ The specific shape of this neighbor love is spelled out throughout the New Testament through positive and negative examples of what it means and does not mean to love others as ourselves. In what follows, we will examine a small sampling of New Testament passages that deal directly with love, with the aim of discerning potential obstacles to love before applying these observations to the act of reading theology. Specifically, we will look at the obstacles of pride, suspicion, favoritism, and impatience—what I would call the “enemies of love.”

Enemy 1: Pride

Love . . . does not boast, it is not proud. (1 Cor. 13:4)

Pride, according to Augustine, is “an appetite for a perverse kind of elevation,” a “perverted imitation of God.” He adds, “For pride hates a fellowship of equality under God, and wishes to impose its own dominion upon its equals, in place of God’s rule. Therefore, it hates the just peace of God.”⁸ Pride is animated by a devilish desire to be great, and greatness is construed primarily as “greater *than*.” Rather than enjoying the fellowship of equals, pride delights in exaltation over others, even God. Pride is opposed to humility. Jonathan Edwards helpfully defines humility as a sense of one’s “comparative meanness” when measured against God and fellow creatures.⁹ Our lowliness before God is twofold: natural and moral. The first refers

Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), xii–xiv.

7. I have in mind some understanding of *agape* or charity.

8. Augustine, *City of God against the Pagans*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, trans. and ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 15.13; 19.12.

9. Jonathan Edwards, “Charity and Its Fruits,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 8:233–34.

to the recognition that humanity is infinitely below God in natural perfection, or that God is infinitely above us in greatness. The second refers to the appreciation of one's moral vileness in the face of God's infinite holiness. Edwards sums up this form of human meanness: "His natural meanness is his littleness; his moral meanness is his filthiness."¹⁰ Following from our sense of lowliness before God, we can see our meanness with respect to creatures of superior rank and even fellow humans. "He who has a right sense of himself with respect to God," Edwards writes, "*will open his eyes to see himself aright in all respects.*"¹¹ What this suggests is that humility sharpens our eyesight or even lifts the veil that prevents fallen people from seeing things rightly. Pride, on the other hand, brings a kind of blindness—a blindness to ourselves, others, God, and ultimately all reality.

In "Revelation," Flannery O'Connor tells the story of Mrs. Turpin, a proud white woman from the South.¹² Much of the story takes place in a doctor's waiting room as Mrs. Turpin and her husband, Claud, await his examination. As they wait, she surveys the motley clientele populating the room: the "stylish lady" sitting next to her, who does nothing but flatter her; the ugly college girl reading a textbook, who does nothing but scowl; the white-trashy old woman, mother, and child, adorned in pitiful clothing; the common woman tirelessly chewing gum.

While there, Mrs. Turpin covertly examines people's shoes and determines the social class to which they belong. Mrs. Turpin is the kind of woman "who would occupy herself with the question of who she would have chosen to be if she couldn't have been herself."¹³ Given the option between white trash and black, she decides she'd be a "clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black."¹⁴ She sometimes lies awake at night naming and ordering the various classes of people: blacks on the bottom with white trash, then homeowners, then land and homeowners—her class—and then the wealthy. Now,

10. Edwards, "Charity and Its Fruits," 8:235–36.

11. Edwards, "Charity and Its Fruits," 8:235 (emphasis added).

12. Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 405–24.

13. O'Connor, "Revelation," 407.

14. O'Connor, "Revelation," 408.

as she sits in the waiting room, she feels pretty good about herself, especially compared to the less savory characters surrounding her. In her conversations with the only person worthy of her attention—the stylish lady—she cannot help but express her settled views about the classes. But every time she makes a self-exalting or others-disparaging comment, she notices the ugly college girl’s angry eyes fixed on her—and she can feel the glare.

Mrs. Turpin engages in a long and haughty discourse about the inadequacies of black people and the follies of white trash, culminating in the exclamation, “If it’s one thing I am . . . it’s grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!’ It could have been different!”¹⁵ After enduring this tirade long enough, the ugly girl hurls her textbook at Mrs. Turpin’s head, pounces on her, looks her straight in the eyes and whispers, “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog,”¹⁶ and then passes out.

The rest of the story is about Mrs. Turpin, unable to shake those words, trying to make sense of how *she of all people* could be a wart hog from hell—she with such a wonderful disposition. In the end, the words of a maniacal girl prove revelatory; they open Mrs. Turpin’s eyes to see herself for who she really is. Pride blinded her from seeing things clearly. Everything was interpreted in light of her perceived superiority. No one could be seen for what they were intrinsically but only for what they were in comparison to her, which was not much. Rather than enjoying the fellowship of equals, as Augustine put it, she delighted in exaltation over others.

One line from O’Connor’s story illuminates the influence of pride when it comes to reading. Of Mrs. Turpin, O’Connor writes, “There was nothing you could tell her about people like them that she didn’t know already.”¹⁷ Pride has a self-satisfied, self-sufficient orientation. Kevin Vanhoozer, speaking of hermeneutical pride, writes, “Pride

15. O’Connor, “Revelation,” 415.

16. O’Connor, “Revelation,” 416.

17. O’Connor, “Revelation,” 413.

neglects the voice of the other in favor of its own.”¹⁸ The proud have no need of others and what they might contribute; they know everything already. Pride’s characteristic disdain for equality has a corrupting influence on reading. If I already know what I need to know, I am less likely to listen to other voices; at least I will not listen attentively, since they are in fact the voices of my inferiors. In terms of reading theology, this might translate to interpreting things with a foregone conclusion in mind. We can pigeonhole theologians so that no amount of reading will change our opinion.

This sin occurs on both ends of the theological spectrum: conservative and liberal theologians refuse to learn from one another because the other is not seen as an equal. As Vanhoozer rightly notes, pride is nonpartisan. In the process of reading theology pridefully, however, we become delusional and self-deceived, what Jacobs calls “quixotic readers,” because we only see what we want to see.¹⁹ But humility, pride’s archenemy, drives us to properly estimate our meanness before God and others so that we are able to recognize our limits and shortcomings, thus becoming open to the influence of others. “Humility,” Vanhoozer writes, “is the virtue that constantly reminds interpreters that we can get it *wrong*.”²⁰ Peter Abelard, speaking about how we should humbly approach past theologians, writes, “Let us not presume to denounce them as liars, or disparage them as erroneous. . . . Let us believe it is due more to *our* lack of understanding, than to their failure in writing.”²¹ Humility prompts me to recognize that I do not have the market cornered on theological truth, but that I am in constant need of the palliative breeze of other, diverse voices blowing through my mind.²² In the end, how

18. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 463.

19. Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 91.

20. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, 464.

21. Peter Abelard, “*Yes and No*”: *The Complete Translation of Peter Abelard’s “Sic et Non*,” 2nd ed., trans. Priscilla Throop (Charlotte, VT: MedievalMS, 2008), 11 (emphasis added).

22. An image borrowed from C. S. Lewis in his introduction to Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. by a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 2002), 5.

can we learn from others if we assume we have nothing to learn from them? Pride is the death of learning, but loving humility is a way to life.

Enemy 2: Suspicion

Love is kind. . . . It keeps no record of wrongs. . . . [It] always trusts, always hopes. (1 Cor. 13:4, 5, 7)

Love is kind and “thinketh no evil,” as older translations render it. Love takes the disposition of thinking the best rather than the worst of people. Even when suspicion may be warranted, love does not carry with it the assumption that people cannot be trusted, even those who may have proven untrustworthy in the past. Love keeps no record of wrongs.

Suspicion, an enemy of love, by definition does not think the best of others; rather, it thinketh evil. This is what Edwards refers to as a “censorious spirit,” a fruit of uncharity. He contends that “a Christian spirit is contrary to a censorious spirit; or in other words, it is contrary to a disposition uncharitably to judge others.”²³ A suspicious person, according to Edwards, thinks evil about others with respect to three areas: their religious state, their qualities, and their actions. Concerning the first, he means that some people show an eagerness to think ill of others. They may treat others as hypocrites or false believers on the basis of slender evidence or may condemn people for the very failings they see in themselves. Most noteworthy, for our purposes, he adds that some people “will condemn others as those who must needs be carnal men for differing from them in opinion in some points which are not fundamental.”²⁴ Such denunciations come easily to the suspicious spirit, for whom “different” translates as “suspect.”

Second, a suspicious spirit is blind to the good qualities of others. Edwards writes,

23. Edwards, “Charity and Its Fruits,” 8:283.

24. Edwards, “Charity and Its Fruits,” 8:284.

Some men are very apt to charge others with ignorance and folly and other contemptible qualities which in no way deserve to be so esteemed by them. Some seem to be very apt to entertain a very low and despicable opinion of others, and so to represent them to others, when a charitable spirit would discern many good things in them, and would freely own them to be persons not to be despised. And some are ready to charge others with those morally ill qualities from which they are free, or at least to charge them with them in a much higher degree than they are really in them.²⁵

Suspicion here functions as a prejudice, rendering one incapable of seeing others rightly. It magnifies bad qualities and minimizes the good.

Third, a censorious spirit tends to impute bad motives to others' actions, whether words or deeds. Typically we have no access to the motives driving someone's actions. Yet some of us are quick to assume ill intent and put "bad constructions" (as Edwards calls them) on actions that, as far as any levelheaded person could tell, are good. This disposition is rightly seen by Edwards as "contrary to Christianity."²⁶

Love is kind and always trusts (1 Cor. 13:4, 7); it does no harm to its neighbor (Rom. 13:10) and "covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). These verses represent an antisuspicion manifesto. It could be said that love is a form of eager credulity, a trusting in another that makes one vulnerable. Calvin interprets the apostle's "always trusts" as referring to a sort of simplicity and kindness in judging things. The result of this kind of trust, according to Calvin, is "that a Christian man will reckon it better to be imposed upon by his own kindness and easy temper than to wrong his brother by an unfriendly suspicion."²⁷ Love trusts; it assumes the best. It is not crippled by fear, a close correlate of suspicion.

After denouncing faith as inimical to truth and hope as a fundamentally evil delusion, Nietzsche takes aim at love, writing, "Love is a state in which a man sees things most decidedly as they are *not*." For him, Christian love is a grand illusion. It prevents people from

25. Edwards, "Charity and Its Fruits," 8:284–85.

26. Edwards, "Charity and Its Fruits," 8:285–86.

27. John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, vol. 20, *I and II Corinthians* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 425.

living rational, self-governed lives and opens one up to greater delusion by inculcating a passivity toward life. “When a man is in love,” he writes, “he endures more than at any other time; he submits to anything.”²⁸ While a malformed love may at times result in what Nietzsche highlights, Alan Jacobs takes a different perspective. Speaking of the risks involved in love, Jacobs responds, “Nietzsche’s later thought is driven by fear, but above all else *he fears being deceived* in faith, hope, and love—after all, all three states of mind open one to deception—and would rather suffer anything than the humiliation of being fooled.”²⁹

Jacobs observes that there is space for a healthy suspicion, one bounded by love for one’s neighbor, and he calls this “discernment.” This kind of discerning suspicion is contrary to Nietzsche’s discerning, which, according to Jacobs, “can only suspect and therefore is not discernment at all—since its conclusions are preestablished.” True discernment, while aware of the fallen human condition that occasions suspicion, is “prepared to find blessings and cultivate friendships; in short, to receive gifts.”³⁰ The trust that adorns love cannot escape the possibility of deception if it is going to remain truly open to the other and receive whatever gift attends such loving trust.

How might these general observations speak to the reading of theology? Recall that suspicion judges harshly if disagreements exist, has difficulty seeing the good in others, imputes bad motives, and is averse to trust. These traits manifest themselves in a number of ways as we read theology. First, if in one precious area of theology we find ourselves disagreeing with an author, then we sometimes question the genuineness of the author’s Christian faith. This was a common gut-level response of my students to the liberation theology I mentioned earlier. We seem to have no category for disagreeing with a key premise or point yet still finding goodness, sincerity, or truth in the proposal.

Second, sometimes suspicion takes the form of concluding prematurely, in fear, that the author wishes to disrupt or undermine

28. Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, ed. and trans. H. L. Mencken (New York: Knopf, 1920), 77.

29. Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 88 (emphasis added).

30. Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 88.

one's faith. We distance ourselves immediately, almost reflexively, by ascribing a label to the theologian, so that ultimately Nietzsche's fear dominates our reading. We are afraid of being deceived, so we mount a preemptive strike against the potential deceiver. But in the process we lose the gift that the other theologian might confer because loving trust is generative while suspicion is degenerative; one opens doors to understanding and thereby growth, while the other closes doors to both. As C. S. Lewis writes, "We can find a book bad only by reading it as if it might, after all, be very good. We must empty our minds and lay ourselves open."³¹ He later adds, "The armed and suspicious approach which may save you from being bamboozled by a bad author may also blind and deafen you to the shy and elusive merits—especially if they are unfashionable—of a good one."³²

Last, an encounter with a new theology or theologian may produce a certain kind of theological xenophobia. New theologians are foreigners; as such they may arouse suspicion. Related to the previous point, we may think that these foreigners and their way of thinking are going to disrupt our way of life, our values, our beliefs. Thus we keep them at arm's length and lose out on the possibility of understanding because we do not want to enter their world. Suspicion, or the lack of sympathetic embrace, makes understanding difficult.

Enemy 3: Favoritism

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. (Luke 6:27)

If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. (James 2:8–9)

We are commanded to love our neighbor and to love our enemy. In the story of the Good Samaritan, we see how these commands are often one and the same. The very illustration of neighbor love offered by Jesus signals that our neighbor is everyone, which will

31. C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 116.

32. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 128.

unfortunately include those we might view as “enemies.” This suggests that the kind of love Jesus commands is antithetical to favoritism or “respect of persons” as it used to be called. Commenting on James 2, Calvin makes the point well: “He, then, who says, that a very few, according to his own fancy, ought to be honoured, and others passed by, does not keep the law of God, but yields to the depraved desires of his own heart. God expressly commends to us strangers and enemies, and all, even the most contemptible. To this doctrine the respect of persons is wholly contrary. Hence, rightly does James assert, that respect of persons is inconsistent with love.”³³

Inherent to the kind of respect of persons that James condemns is the desire to earn the approval of a select group. In the present case, the acts performed toward the rich would, in other situations, be demonstrations of love. However, when angled solely toward the respectable, favored, and privileged and away from the unworthy, despised, and marginalized, these acts are a shell of love. In fact, they are antilove, a transgression of the whole law. Neighbor love is not a quid pro quo arrangement; it does not act with the expectation of receiving something in return. This is evident from the Samaritan parable: no return was to be made by the recipient of love. This is also the case in enemy love. In fact, we can expect to receive the opposite from our enemy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, speaking of enemy love, writes: “This love knows no difference among diverse kinds of enemies, except that the more animosity the enemy has, the more my love is required. No matter whether it is a political or religious enemy, they can all expect only undivided love from Jesus’ followers. . . . We should not only bear evil and the evil person passively, not only refuse to answer a blow with a blow, but in sincere love we should be fond of our enemies.”³⁴ It is not distinctly Christian to love those with whom we have natural, religious, or ideological bonds. We are, rather, commanded to embrace those whom we

33. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 22, *Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John, James, 11 Peter, Jude* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 305.

34. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss, vol. 4 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 139.

would otherwise have nothing to do with, even those who would undermine and oppose us.³⁵

To return to the matter of pursuing the approval of others, it can be said that love pursued for that end is ultimately self-centered. In *An Experiment in Criticism* C. S. Lewis gives a taxonomy of bad—or “unliterary”—ways to read literature. Among these he includes the “status seekers,” those who are “entirely dominated by fashion.” Such people read only for the sake of making themselves acceptable to certain elites. They read with some enthusiasm the “approved” literature, particularly new, exciting, and controversial works.³⁶ Yet their reading is a *using* rather than an *enjoying*. The book and its author are important not in their own right but only for some other end, a self-seeking end. That is, self-seekers want to be “in.”

We are now better situated to consider at least two ways that favoritism might undermine the charitable reading of theology. First, we tend to give deference to theologians who are in our “camp.” We read their work with charity and try to make the most sense of what they are saying. On the other hand, we may treat theologians who are “foreigners” with suspicion (at best) and quick dismissal (at worst). Yet love of neighbor demands that we not just care for our own—like the “sinners” and “publicans” do—but go out of our way to think favorably about our theological “enemies.” Second, favoritism can take the form of status seeking even in theological culture. There are always movements, writers, or books that are *en vogue*. The status seeker tends to read those respected theologians, while despising the simple and less celebrated writers. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously remarked, “To be great is to be misunderstood.”³⁷ This statement, *mistaken* a certain way, becomes the mantra of the status seeker. According to this line of reasoning, sometimes the more obscure and easily misunderstood a theologian is, the better. This tendency

35. Bonhoeffer continues, “Jesus does not need to say that people should love their sisters and brothers, their people, their friends. That goes without saying. But by simply acknowledging that and not wasting any further words on it, and, in contrast to all that, commanding only love for enemies, he shows what he means by love and what they are to think about the other sort of love.” Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 143.

36. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 7–8.

37. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993), 25.

can manifest itself in students rejecting their theological upbringing because, according to some of them, their upbringing is unsophisticated. Yet we can see how Jesus's love command undercuts this kind of approach to reading. Love requires that we treat the supposedly simple and the putatively profound similarly, which becomes easier if we are not seeking something in return for our act of love, such as praise, respect, or status.³⁸

Enemy 4: Impatience

Love is patient. . . . It is not easily angered. . . . [It] always perseveres.
(1 Cor. 13:4, 5, 7)

Love is long-suffering, enduring many things for the sake of promoting peace and harmony in Christ's church.³⁹ It often requires that we bear injury willingly and refrain from a defensive and resentful posture. "Forbearance" is the old term and it evokes thoughts of God lovingly and patiently bearing with his difficult people to the point of sending his Son. Patience is not *naïveté*; it is a bearing with not only *in spite of* sin and offense but also *in light of* them. Speaking of God's patience, Barth writes:

There can be no question of disappointment or self-deception on the part of God with respect to the sincerity, or insincerity, of the human penitence for which He waits in His patience. God is not short-sighted, nor is He subject to any optimistic illusions, when again and again He saves and preserves Israel only to reap continually wild grapes instead of grapes. God does not, then, experience any disillusionment with regard to his people, the many. He knows very well what is our frame. But because He knows it, He has good ground for being patient with us.⁴⁰

38. None of this means that there are not texts to which some favoritism is well deserved, such as those of the great theologians. These texts tend to be treated with greater care and charity. Thus, they are less in need of defense.

39. Calvin, *I and II Corinthians*, 422.

40. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 419. Hereafter *CD* (page numbers are from the older edition, which are noted in the margin of the 2010 edition).

Patience knows the common weakness of the other's frame and, in that light, endures with him. The ground of this patience, for Barth, is Jesus, so that the one who commands love (here expressed as patience) is the very ground for it. Like God in Christ, our endurance is no mere tolerance. Rather, it is teleological, having the ultimate well-being of the other in view. Long-suffering love, then, is not quick-tempered. It is not looking for opportunities to be offended. One is reminded of James's exhortation: "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires" (James 1:19–20). Rather than being quick to speak and express anger, we are to "hurry up and listen."⁴¹ Sometimes we find ourselves chomping at the bit to vindicate ourselves, and we fail to listen attentively to what others are saying. Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin observes, "Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate sufficient attention to slow down and linger intently over an object."⁴² Love, conversely, demands attentiveness to the details and particularities of others, and this requires being slow to speak. In other words, love is patient, enduring, persevering. The earlier quote from Emerson, when taken in a different way, might be informative. Before saying, "To be great is to be misunderstood," he names several great thinkers who in their own time were misunderstood. "Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood?" he asks. "Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh."⁴³ One might infer that had people in their day borne with these great men, these people would have recognized and experienced their brilliance. However, the lack of attention, a possible trait of what Emerson calls "little minds," resulted in not receiving the reward that sometimes awaits the patient and long-suffering.

Jacobs connects these insights to reading through the lens of hope. He writes, "The charitable reader offers the gift of constant and loving

41. Craig L. Blomberg and Mariam J. Kamell, *James*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 85.

42. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, quoted in Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 53.

43. Emerson, *Self-Reliance and Other Essays*, 24–25.

attention—faithfulness—to a story, to a poem, to an argument, in hope that it will be rewarded. But this hope involves neither *demand* nor *expectation*; indeed, if it *demand*ed or *expect*ed it would not be hope.”⁴⁴ Patience, according to Jacobs, is displayed by attentiveness to what the author is doing, and this attentiveness produces understanding, not to mention other benefits such as pleasure. This practice is not a characteristic of the “unliterary,” the impatient users of texts. Lewis remarks:

The sure mark of an unliterary man is that he considers “I’ve read it already” to be a conclusive argument against reading a work. We have all known [those] who remembered a novel so dimly that they had to stand for half an hour in the library skimming through it before they were certain they had once read it. But the moment they became certain, they rejected it immediately. It was for them dead, like a burnt-out match, an old railway ticket, or yesterday’s paper; they had already used it. Those who read great works, on the other hand, will read the same work ten, twenty or thirty times during the course of their life.⁴⁵

How many of us have been this unliterary reader? We may have read a work for a school assignment but can scarcely remember what the book was about. Part of the problem is that the book was not patiently attended to, possibly because we were reading it for a purpose other than for enjoyment. A charitable reader understands that books, like people, can be easily misunderstood or, at the very least, incompletely understood; thus they require repeated and persistent engagement. Understanding will not likely come to the “one and done” reader nor to the user.

What bearing do patience and impatience, construed in this way, have on reading theology? First, as mentioned earlier, it is not uncommon for students to ask the impatient question: Where is this found in the Bible? What they might have in mind is concern for the writer to “show his work.” If biblical exposition or at least parenthetical references are not explicit, then the theology is pronounced “unbiblical.” While all Christian theology must engage Scripture in some

44. Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 89.

45. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 2.

manner, theologians do this in different ways—some explicit and others implicit (as we will see in chap. 3). A patient reader is more likely to find a deeper biblical logic in these “unbiblical” theologies because she is willing to wait and attend to the details of what is being said beyond what might be gleaned at first glance.⁴⁶ Love is not quick-tempered and prone to rash judgments.

Second, the concern for practical application to “real life” can sometimes short-circuit the pursuit of understanding. Impatience to “get to the point” is the attitude of a user. Lewis likens this false seeker of understanding to a person who plays games, not to enjoy them, but to improve his body through them. The game exists not as a valuable end to be enjoyed but as a means to a more important end. In the process the game itself is lost. Speaking of sports as well as literature, Lewis writes, “To come to the particular game with nothing but a hygienic motive or to the tragedy with nothing but a desire for self-improvement, is not really to play the one or to receive the other. *Both attitudes fix the ultimate intention on oneself.* Both treat as a means something which must, while you play or read it, be accepted for its own sake.”⁴⁷ While I would certainly say that the practical questions deserve to be asked, a premature focus on the practical value of a theological proposal diverts attention away from understanding to something more self-centered. If we patiently attend to first things (i.e., understanding), we will likely get the second things (i.e., practical application). If we too quickly attend to second things, we are in danger of losing both.⁴⁸

Finally, following Jacobs, it would appear that hope, or some form of expectation, is a characteristic of a charitable and patient reader. This hope involves trusting that the reading of this particular theologian (to whom I may not be favorably disposed) will yield good fruit if I patiently attend to it. At the very least, we aim for a union

46. This approach is akin to what experts in art or literary criticism would call “descriptive criticism”: the attempt to patiently understand and carefully describe the work under consideration. This act precedes “evaluative criticism,” where the reader or observer assesses the merits of the work. See Ralph A. Smith, *The Sense of Art: A Study in Aesthetic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 52.

47. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 8–9 (emphasis added).

48. This idea is adapted from Lewis’s essay titled “First and Second Things.” See C. S. Lewis, *First and Second Things: Essays in Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Glasgow: Collins, 1985), 19–24.

of understanding, though not necessarily agreement. But like most unions of any worth, this will be a hard-fought victory achieved through persevering, slow-tempered love.

Love's Knowledge, or How Would Jesus Read?

Though this book is about learning to read theology both critically and charitably, it should be clear that these are not mutually exclusive activities but rather are complementary. For example, we saw that a patient reader is an attentive reader, and few things are more important to a critical reading than enduring attention to the details. What this suggests is that love can contribute to knowledge, a knowledge that only comes through a form of union with another. This is a deeply Christian notion; it is a variation of faith seeking understanding. It was Anselm who famously prayed, "But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand."⁴⁹ Anselm brings belief and love together and then binds them with knowledge. This principle can be said to apply to our knowledge of others, including the works of authors, who are present in their writing, so to speak.⁵⁰ Reading charitably is about respecting an author and extending respect to what the author has crafted. Jacobs observes, "One might say, using Cardinal Newman's terms, that without love one may achieve 'notional' assent to some proposition but remain disabled from any 'real' assent to the proposition's truth."⁵¹ Without love one can know the truth of something in the abstract but not by experience or conviction. A depth of knowledge is opened up only to the lover. Hence, love is not a naïveté that reduces the person (as in Nietzsche) but that which expands the person's capacities to see beyond his or her own horizon. As Lewis notes, to expand ourselves, we must empty ourselves.

49. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 87.

50. One author calls this the "semantic presence" of the author (specifically, in his case, referring to God and Scripture). See Timothy Ward, *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 65–66.

51. Jacobs, *Theology of Reading*, 50.

In love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person's place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favour of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandise himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this. Obviously this process can be described either as an enlargement or as a temporary annihilation of the self. But that is an old paradox; "he that loseth his life shall save it."⁵²

To grow in knowledge, we must hold loosely to our knowledge. This gesturing at emptying ourselves, or what theologians call "kenosis," leads to the place we probably should have begun, that is, with Jesus Christ.

After reminding the believers in Philippi to consider the love they share in Christ (Phil. 2:1), the apostle Paul exhorts them to love one another (2:2), doing nothing out of selfishness and everything out of humility (2:3). The attitude they are to embody—the attitude of love—is patterned after Jesus (2:5). The Son who exists as God does not cling to his rights as God (2:6). As Barth puts it, "He did not consider or treat His equality with God as His one exclusive possibility. He did not treat it as a robber does his booty."⁵³ Rather, he empties himself (kenosis) by taking the form of a servant (2:7), and his humility culminates in his obedient death on the cross for us and for our salvation (2:8). Without losing himself (i.e., his deity), Jesus takes on a form of servanthood for the sake of our well-being. Why is the shape of the Son's self-offering of significance for Christian love in practice? Barth answers, "It serves . . . directly to emphasise the apostolic exhortation to humility, in which each member of the community is to subordinate himself to the other, not seeking his own but things of others. . . . Any 'mind' that is not directed to it [the Son's condescension], however exalted or penetrating it may be, passes by Christ and therefore passes by God, and is therefore an unchristian 'mind.'"⁵⁴

52. Lewis, *Experiment in Criticism*, 138.

53. Barth, *CD II/1*, 516.

54. Barth, *CD II/1*, 517–18.

The pattern of the self-involving, self-offering, self-emptying love of God is the undoing of pride, suspicion, favoritism, and impatience. In the being and act of Jesus Christ, in his taking on himself the form of a servant and dying on the cross, we see the openness, undeserved favor, patience, and humility of God. Paul's exhortation is that we participate in this kind of love and thus show ourselves to be children of God, shining as stars "in a warped and crooked generation" (Phil. 2:15). Christian love is a cruciform movement toward the other in every sphere, even in our reading of theology.

Conclusion: To Read with Intelligent Charity

By emphasizing charity and the openness that attends it, I do not wish to suggest that there is no room for disagreement and critique when engaging theology. As is the case in marriage, love speaks the truth; it does not completely overlook the faults of loved ones. The openness I am advocating is not an unbounded openness. Rather, love is an open and closed door: open to surprises, to correction, to new ideas; closed to falsehood, to incoherence, to harmful ideas. Judgments must inevitably be made regarding the truth of a theological proposal. The aim of this book is to help those who read theology to develop the skills and habits of head and heart necessary for engaging theological texts well, to the end that we would move from merely visceral responses to more-thoughtful ones. It is my hope that by offering these various considerations, readers will be better equipped to read theology critically, charitably, and with joy as the "happy science" it is.