



*The Great Theologians:
A Brief Guide*

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A Brief Interview with Gerald R. McDermott

How is theology relevant to the average Christian?

Every thinking Christian is a theologian, since “theology” means “thinking about God.” But there are some who do this for a living and some who have been universally recognized as seeing further than the rest of us. That is the relevance of theology—it provides us with guidance from those who have seen the territory ahead. Some, of course, have not seen well, and we can learn from their mistakes. But the vast majority of what ten of the eleven theologians I cover in my book have seen is of great help to our recurring concerns as Christians today.

How is good theology developed?

Good theology is developed by reading the Bible with and at the feet of the great masters. It is something like going to a great person of God on a regular basis with questions regarding the Bible and asking that person to advise you through questions and difficulties. Without such guidance, we easily go astray. So we should read the Bible for ourselves but not by ourselves. We should listen humbly to the wisdom of the thinkers whom the church has proposed as its greatest minds and hearts.

Why is it important to study theologians alongside Scripture?

The Bible is not always clear on some things. On the basic issues of who the Savior is and how we are saved, it is clear. But there is much else that Christians have disagreed on for two millennia, and for those questions the guidance of the great theologians is indispensable. Even on the question of salvation, and perhaps especially on that, the wisdom of the church tradition is immensely helpful and enriching.

Why did you choose to write about these eleven theologians?

They are among the most influential of all. Not all have been appreciated, but all have had enormous influence on Christian thinking in the last two thousand years.

Have each of these theologians influenced the church in a positive way?

No. Schleiermacher, for instance, was the father of Protestant liberalism. His portrait of God and Jesus was fundamentally distorted, and has done great damage to the church. But precisely because he has been so influential, it is important for Christians to understand him. Orthodox Christians might even find that their own thinking has been unwittingly shaped, in part, by the trends he introduced.

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