



Reinke, Tony.

Lit!: A Christian Guide to Reading Books

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

The back cover to *Lit!: A Christian Guide to Reading Books* whimsically says that author Tony Reinke and his wife are approaching their county's record for library fines. I have my suspicions that this is a joke—but whether true or false it makes a point—Tony Reinke is a reader! There's a difference between *someone who reads* and a *reader*. Someone who reads does so out of necessity. They read street signs in order to navigate their surroundings; they read menus in order to eat; they read newspapers in order to know what's happening in the world (or at least what's happening in sports); but they only read when they really have to. A reader on the other hand is someone who reads even when not necessary. They read to learn, to laugh, to love, to live. This is a book for both types of people.

Throughout the course of 15 chapters divided into 2 parts Reinke sets out to turn the people who read into readers and the readers into better, or at least more focused, readers. Part 1 addresses a "Theology of Books and Reading." Over the span of 6 chapters Reinke lays out the supreme importance of Scripture and the Christian worldview. All books besides the Bible are imperfect and as such should be read in light of the perfect. The Bible should dominate our reading and form the basis by which we evaluate everything else that we read, whether fiction or non-fiction, Christian or non-Christian. Reinke advocates reading broadly and not limiting oneself to simply Christian books. Following Calvin, and Augustine before him, Reinke believes that all truth is

God's truth and truth can be found in plenty of non-Christian literature. He also advocates reading fiction in order to feed the imagination. If God didn't want us to cultivate imaginative thinking then he wouldn't have filled Scripture with so much rich symbolism (e.g., in the book of Revelation).

Part 2 is the application section of the book. Now that Reinke has established the foundational aspects for being a discerning reader, he moves on to giving the reader some tips for becoming better (or more focused) readers. So, for example, we're given tips on how to determine what books or authors to read or how to mark them up and annotate them once we're reading them. We're urged to make time to read rather than excuses not to read. We're encouraged to read real books and read them reflectively rather than scanning small bits of info off the internet or e-readers. It's suggested that reading in groups and discussing the contents of the book will help us to gain better understanding and more appreciation. He admits up front that his tips are what works for him and that every reader is different, but we can take the general principles and make them our own. In reality this is very practical advice but seasoned readers will probably realize (unbeknownst to some) that they already have a process or rhythm to the way they do things.

My process begins by scanning book catalogs or a publisher's or bookseller's website. What I look for is new material in my primary areas of interest (Trinitarian theology, early Christology, NT studies, etc.). Over the years I've come to learn what I enjoy reading and what I don't, so while Reinke advocates reading fiction to fuel the imagination, I find myself ultimately bored with it. I much prefer the visual images of television, movies, and video games for that. After pinpointing those titles I proceed to check for a table of contents. This might require a trip to Amazon.com or Google Books in order to see a preview if one is available. After skimming the table of contents I check to see if I can access the bibliography if the book has one. The works that an author consults in the writing of his/her book tells me a lot about the book I'm thinking of reading.

I almost always avoid blurbs and I tend to only read reviews if it's a book I'm not sure that I'm really interested in or if it's a book that's been out for a while that I haven't had time to check out. Once I make the decision that I want to read a book I have to decide whether or not I think I'd like to review it. Many times I do decide that it would be worth engaging in a review and in those situations I contact the publisher and get the ball rolling. At other times I'll pick something up just to read for leisure. But once the book is in hand I proceed to mark the thing up like nobody's business (provided that it requires marking). And once it has been scribbled in I'm ready to formulate some thoughts. Once those thoughts are formulated they're ready to be published online for others to read and interact with. And this is something that Reinke touches on in this

book. Reading is a conversation; first between the author and the reader but then between the reader and others. Blogging is just a really convenient format for me to discuss what I've been reading with other folks who have similar interests.

Reinke says much more than I've highlighted in this review, and I'm confident that his tips will help to make readers out of people who just read, but I doubt they'll make seasoned readers change their habits much, if at all. There were a couple of peculiarities in this volume but nothing too egregious. One thing that struck me as a bit strange was when Reinke said, "Theologically weighty books about Christ are essential for the soul—for men and women... Reading to know and delight in Christ is an essential pursuit by women and men alike." (96-97) Now in the section marked by the ellipsis he does quote a study that talks about women reading Christian books but not specifically theological books, yet it just struck me as odd for him to mention this at all. I would have never thought to exclude women from those whose soul it was essential to read theologically weighty books or from those who should read to know and delight in Christ, that is, until he qualified it with "men *and* women."

The one thing that really bothered me—and where I'd probably accuse Reinke of heresy if I was the type to do such a thing—is where he writes about marginalia and lending/borrow books. First he says, "By now you know why I prefer printed books—the kinds of books that friends can borrow..." (148) Strike one! But then he says:

*I write in my books to express emotion. Healthy readers experience emotions as they read. They express joy, concern, or even anger at times. A balanced range of emotional responses to books is a sign that we are engaged readers. And the margins are a great place to vent anger or sing praises. The raw thoughts of a reader are best written in the margin. And this is what makes borrowing books from readers who write in their books so fun! Documenting these emotional responses is one reason why I hold a pen in my hand as I read. The emotions displayed in the reading experience can be captured. They *should* be captured. Those marginal notes are where the mind of the author and the mind of the reader collide. I hope my kids will one day read over my notes and see my responses to a book. (149-50)*

To start, lending friends books is the best way to never see them again, or never see them in the same state that you lent them again! Reinke talks about writing his name in his books to express ownership; I do this too! And all my books are just that, MINE! I'd sooner give a book away or

buy a new one for a friend then loan it out. And this bit about reading other people's notes is nonsense. I get the sentimentality that Reinke is going for with his kids, but c'mon, have you ever bought a used book and been happy to read someone else's notes or see their scribbles? Of course you haven't! It's awful! But all jokes aside I think that Reinke has furnished us with a nice little book here. I'd have no qualms about recommending this to people I know who would like to become better readers.