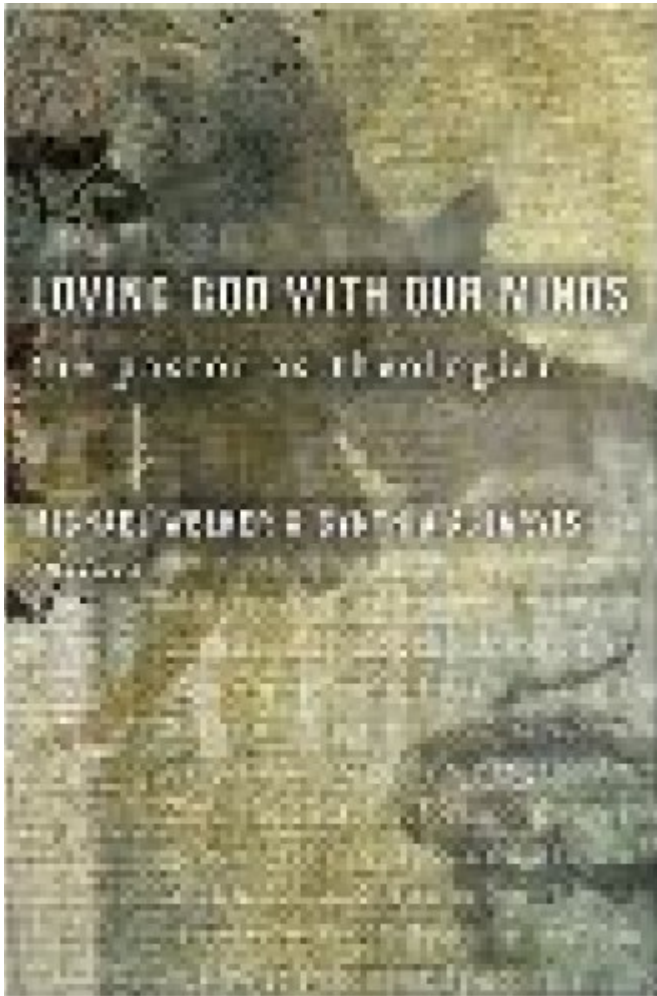


Loving God with Our Minds

reviewed by [Martin B. Copenhaver](#) in the [September 6, 2005](#) issue

In Review



Loving God with Our Minds: The Pastor as Theologian

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Eerdmans

Can pastors also be theologians? Wallace Alston, in whose honor *Loving God with Our Minds* has been published, would answer that question with a resounding yes.

Until recently Alston was director of the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, where he developed the Pastor-Theologian Program. Alston is convinced that “in all denominations there are pastors and priests of extraordinary intellectual ability” who are just as “capable of theological scholarship as academic theologians,” and “lack only the time, context, and encouragement for such pursuits.” He contends that “the renewal of the church” depends on such pastors’ “emergence as a formative influence.”

Because this book includes some valuable essays for pastors and academic theologians alike, it may foster conversation between church and academy. Unfortunately, however, it does not fulfill the promise of lifting up the theological work done by pastors, and in some respects it even contributes to the notion that pastors are not real theologians. Only four of the 28 essays are by pastors serving congregations, and those four write almost as if they are afraid that readers will find out they are pastors. Rather than writing out of their pastoral context, they throw in references to the parish in much the same way that an after-dinner speaker tells a joke at the beginning of his remarks before turning to the serious business at hand. This is not entirely surprising. Most pastors doubt that they have much to contribute to theological inquiry because they too have come to associate it with the academy. After all, pastors are trained by academics, not vice versa, so it is easy to see why they show such deference to their academic counterparts when it comes to doing theology.

Even the term *pastor-theologian* is problematic because it implies that the two roles are distinct, albeit related, like player-coach or actor-director, when in fact they are inextricably connected. More helpful terminology would instead emphasize the context in which theologians think about God; perhaps we could call academics and pastors who do theology academic theologians and pastoral theologians. Whatever terms we use, we should challenge any implication that the deepest theological reflection must take place in settings other than the church—a notion that would certainly have seemed strange to the likes of the apostle Paul. The greatest Christian thinkers in the U.S.—Jonathan Edwards, Horace Bushnell, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King Jr.—have all been local pastors.

Rather than asking whether a pastor can also be a theologian, we should be inquiring whether it is possible to be a pastor without being a theologian. As one of the contributors to this book reminds us, “The earliest meaning of the word

‘theologian’ was not simply someone who thought about God, but someone who was also a person of prayer to God.” Certainly by that definition every pastor is a theologian. The problem, though, is that not all pastors are good theologians. Many are guilty of sloppy or sentimental thinking about God. The obvious need for deep thinking about God in the parish will best be met by pastors who are willing to think deeply in their own contexts, rather than by those who assume that the real theological work takes place elsewhere.

Pastors have much to learn from the contributions of those who do their deep thinking about God in an academic setting. And that is where this volume makes its contribution. There are some wonderful essays in *Loving God with Our Minds*, traversing a wide range of themes, from the relationship between religion and science to a reexamination of what we mean when we affirm that Christ “ascended into heaven.” The volume is particularly enriched by the contributions, 11 in all, of theologians who live outside the U.S. Gerhard Sauter’s essay about the state of America’s historic sense of distinction as “a city upon a hill,” now entangled with the events and aftermath of September 11, is all the more interesting—and perhaps all the more perceptive—because Sauter is German. Jürgen Moltmann ponders matters relevant to believers wherever they may live in his wise devotional essay “Praying with Eyes Open,” about the relationship between prayer and watchfulness. These essays, and others as well, make this volume worth reading and a worthy tribute to Wallace Alston, even if it is not all that it purports to be.