Analytic Perspectives on Method and Authority in Theology

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Analytic Theology as Sapiential Theology: Reflections on a Concern Raised by Kevin J. Vanhoozer

https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0030
Received June 26, 2017; accepted July 5, 2017

Abstract: In a recent essay, the prolific and influential evangelical theologian, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, claims that analytic theology “is one of the major developments of our time, boasting annual conferences, a manifesto, and an online journal.” Vanhoozer mentions the rise of analytic theology not to celebrate its success but to offer a cautionary note to those who are inclined to practice theology in an analytic key. One of the concerns that Vanhoozer raises is that the analytic method falls short of what we might call “sapiential theology”—roughly, theology that facilitates the acquisition of wisdom. In this paper, I examine this concern and explore a few ways in which analytic theology might be sapiential.

Keywords: Kevin Vanhoozer; analytic theology; wisdom; theological method

In a recent essay, the prolific and influential evangelical theologian, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, reminds us that analytic theology “is one of the major developments of our time, boasting annual conferences, a manifesto, and an online journal.”¹ The journal to which Vanhoozer refers is the Journal of Analytic Theology, which is jointly sponsored by the Baylor University and the University of Notre Dame. Projects and colloquia related to analytic theology have appeared not only at these two respected universities but also academic institutions such as Fuller Theological Seminary, the University of Innsbruck, Munich School of Philosophy, the University of Helsinki, the Shalem Center, and the University of St. Andrews—the last of which recently announced the Logos Institute, an institute for analytic and exegetical theology. Analytic theology is thus an international, even interreligious, movement that is housed at some of the leading institutions for religious thought. What makes this particularly remarkable is that analytic theology, explicitly branded as such, is a relative newcomer, first appearing in 2009 when Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea edited the collection of essays, Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology, with Oxford University Press. Hence the achievements to which Vanhoozer points have emerged in less than a decade. Clearly, many within the theological world were hungry for the arrival of something like analytic theology.²

The analytic theological movement is not without its critics, however. In fact, Vanhoozer mentions the rise of analytic theology not to celebrate its success but to offer a cautionary note to those who are inclined to practice theology in an analytic key.³ One of the concerns that Vanhoozer raises is that the

¹ Vanhoozer, “Can I Get a Witness?”.
² Of course, this isn’t the whole story. Certainly the generous backing of the John Templeton Foundation is largely responsible for the impression that analytic theology has made on the contemporary academic landscape. See, Chignell, “The Two (or Three) Cultures of Analytic Theology: A Roundtable”, 569-572.
³ Vanhoozer, “Can I Get a Witness?”.

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analytic method falls short of what we might call “sapiential theology”—roughly, theology that facilitates the acquisition of wisdom. In this paper, I examine this concern and explore a few ways in which analytic theology might be sapiential.4

1 What is analytic theology?

Before we proceed to Vanhoozer’s worry about analytic theology, we must first come to some agreement about what analytic theology is. In brief, analytic theology may be described as “theology attuned to the deployment of the skills, resources, and virtues of analytic philosophy.”5 Beyond that, Michael Rea’s more detailed description has become something of the standard characterization of analytic theology (even for those who believe that some modification is required). Here is what Rea says.

As I see it, analytic theology is just the activity of approaching theological topics with the ambitions of an analytic philosopher and in a style that conforms to the prescriptions that are distinctive of analytic philosophical discourse. It will involve, more or less, pursuing those topics in a way that engages the literature that is constitutive of the analytic tradition, employing some of the technical jargon from that tradition, and so on. But, in the end, it is the style and the ambitions that are most central.6

What, then, is this style and what are the referenced ambitions that characterize analytic philosophy and, by extension, analytic theology?

Rea lists two ambitions. There is the ambition of identifying “the scope and limits of our powers to obtain knowledge of the world,” and there is the ambition of providing “true explanatory theories [...] in areas of inquiry (metaphysics, morals, and the like) that fall outside the scope of the natural sciences.”7

Rea indicates that informatively describing the rhetorical style of analytic philosophy is fairly difficult. But “Making no claims either to completeness or universality,” Rea submits that “paradigmatic instances” of the analytic style “more or less” conform to the following prescriptions:8

P1. Write as if philosophical positions and conclusions can be adequately formulated in sentences that can be formalized and logically manipulated.
P2. Prioritize precision, clarity, and logical coherence.
P3. Avoid substantive (non-decorative) use of metaphor and other tropes whose semantic content outstrips their propositional content.
P4. Work as much as possible with well-understood primitive concepts, and concepts that can be analyzed in terms of those.
P5. Treat conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) as a source of evidence.9

Rea explains and defends P1-P5 at some length. At present, I only comment on P2 and P3, since these are the two that are most often misunderstood.

In my experience, non-analytic theologians tend to be puzzled by P3, especially given that Scripture is replete with metaphor.10 It is important to see, however, Rea is not denying that metaphor has cognitive

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4 In particular, I will respond to Vanhoozer’s concern as presented in “Love’s Wisdom: The Authority of Scripture’s Form and Content for Faith’s Understanding and Theological Judgment”, 247-275. The worry presented in Vanhoozer’s “Can I Get a Witness?” is a bit different and will not be discussed within the present article.
5 Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology”, 54. I should add that Abraham defines analytic theology as a form of *systematic* theology. This doesn’t strike me as entirely right, however, since one can do analytic theology in a fashion that is not about system building or defending.
7 Ibid., 4.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 4-5.
10 It is worth noting that Thomas McCall writes that “Analytic theologians will disagree among themselves as to how—and how much—metaphor is useful and legitimate.” See McCall, *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, 20.
significance. On the contrary, he takes “it for granted that metaphors often, even if not always, have
cognitive significance that outstrips whatever propositional content they might have.” Nor is Rea denying
“that metaphors get used in analytic theorizing to put forward models, or to otherwise ‘support’ various
kinds of (literal) theoretical claims.” Yet “in such cases,” Rea thinks “it is the models or the supportive
claims that play the more substantive role” in analytic modes of discourse. Although perhaps not initially
apparent, Rea’s basic point, as I understand it, is rather mundane or relatively uncontroversial. The point,
as Thomas McCall puts it, is that those operating in the analytic mode “are not at liberty to trade loosely
in metaphor without ever being able to specify just what is meant by those metaphors. They are not, then,
free to make claims the meaning of which cannot be specified or spelled out.” At the very least, analytic
philosophers (and theologians) are not free to do so when meaningful and aptly substitutable forms of
discourse are available.

P2 has also raised a few eyebrows. Doesn’t every theologian and philosopher, analytic or not, seek to
achieve precision and logical coherence? And what does it mean for a piece of analytic writing to be clear
when the prose and arguments of analytic philosophers are frequently impenetrable to those outside the
relevant guild? Rea’s often overlooked response to such questions comes in a footnote.

[One] obvious distinctive feature of analytic philosophy is the heavy use of counterexamples, including bizarrely imagina-
tive ones. I take this to be one of the primary manifestations of the prioritization of precision. As for prioritization of clarity,
this claim can seem ironic in light of the fact that quite a lot of analytic philosophy is very difficult even for specialists,
and totally inaccessible to non-specialists. But the idea that analytic philosophers prize clarity has, I think, less to do
with prizing accessibility to non-specialists (or even to specialists) and more to do with the fact that analytic philosophers
place a high premium on spelling out hidden assumptions, on scrupulously trying to lay bare whatever evidence one has
(or lacks) for the claims that one is making, and one taking care to confine one’s vocabulary to ordinary language, well-
understood primitive concepts, and technical jargon definable in terms of these.

Hence, Rea doesn’t deny that there are many non-analytic philosophers (and theologians) who write in a
manner that is precise, coherent, and clear. Instead, Rea’s claim appears to be that analytic philosophers
approach the desiderata within P2 in a distinctive and amplified fashion. As Oxford theologian William Wood
notes, it would be profoundly ignorant to think that analytic philosophers are alone in prioritizing precision,
clarity, and logical coherence; at the same time, “it does not seem like special pleading to say that analytic
writing maximizes” these features “in a way that goes beyond what we find in other disciplines.” Read in this
way, P2 does seem to pick-out something important about the rhetorical style of analytic philosophy.

So, for Rea, analytic theology is the activity of approaching theological topics with the noted style and
ambitions of the analytic philosopher. Objections to this way of approaching theology as well as defenses
of it have been discussed at length elsewhere. For now, it is worth underscoring that while many analytic
theologians believe that Rea’s characterization of analytic theology is generally on target, some have recently
argued that Rea’s characterization does not sufficiently highlight the way in which analytic philosophy, and
so too analytic theology, is an intellectual culture or tradition (not to be confused with a club). In other
words, to understand what is properly “analytic” about certain philosophers and theologians, it’s insufficient
to refer to a particular rhetorical style and pair of ambitions. Instead, one also must refer to the way in which
those who can be described as “analytic” are formed by an intellectual milieu that habituates them to
reason, argue, and conceptualize in a particular manner in conversation with various thinkers and schools

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12 McCall, An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology, 20.
13 In conversation, Rea said (in effect) that the analytic theologian or philosopher can be described as one who does what one can to avoid metaphors and other tropes that contain unspecified meanings (or meanings otherwise not immediately clear from the context) that are central to the argument or proposal in question.
15 For example, Bitar (cited above, n. 14) seems to overlook this.
18 This was first noted by William Wood, “Trajectories, Traditions, and Tools in Analytic Theology”, 254-266. On the idea that the analytic theological movement is not a club, see Coakley, “On Why Analytic Theology is Not a Club”, 601-608.
of thought. Though analytic (qua analytic) philosophers or theologians aren't required to believe certain philosophical or theological doctrines (beyond, perhaps, that which is required to participate in meaningful dialogue), they certainly do reason and argue within an ever-developing tradition or intellectual culture that prizes certain voices, assumptions, writings, intellectual virtues, and so on. To get at this phenomenon, Oliver Crisp describes an intellectual culture as “a rough grouping within a particular intellectual discipline (such as philosophy, or theology) that identifies itself as having a distinctive approach to its subject matter, and a particular methodological approach to its subject.”¹⁹ These “intellectual cultures are something like MacIntyrian intellectual traditions,”²⁰ only “less totalizing than a MacIntyrian tradition, being more of a discernible group within a given discipline.”²¹ Moreover, “To be a part of such an intellectual culture is to be socialized into a way of approaching a particular intellectual discipline.”²² Crisp concludes that we should think of analytic theology as a robust and distinctive intellectual culture—a kind of analytic culture—within the discipline of theology.

This seems right. The style and ambitions to which Rea refers do capture something important about the practice of analytic philosophy and theology, but to understand them in any detail one needs to place them in the context of the intellectual culture of analytic philosophy and, more recently, analytic theology—and that culture is better understood by immersion than description. This is not to suggest that the analytic theologian belongs exclusively to the analytic intellectual culture. Ideally, in my view, the analytic theologian is “transcultural” in the sense that she is fluent in the “language” of contemporary (and ancient) “mainstream” academic theology as well as the “language” of analytic philosophy, at least insofar as it pertains to her distinctive theological projects. I submit that such trans-culturalism is immensely valuable for helping the analytic theologian engage the task of theology in a manner that is at once analytic and robustly theological.²³

Whatever the case, in what follows I shall understand analytic theology in the manner described within this section. Analytic theology, then, is something like an intellectual culture that approaches theological topics with the style and ambitions described by Rea.

Notice that this account of analytic theology is fairly thin.²⁴ Unlike, say, liberation theology or Thomism, analytic theology is not a school of thought that requires allegiance to a body of doctrines. One can be liberal or conservative, Protestant or Catholic or Orthodox, a Barthian or a Palamite, or much more besides. Nor does being an analytic theologian require commitment to a particular vision for the aim or goal of theology. For example, the analytic theologian could believe that the purpose of theology is the spiritual transformation of the Church, or she could hold that theology is mostly a theoretical discipline that shouldn’t be expected to make much of a difference to the lives of those in the pews. In short, the positions that the analytic theologian takes on substantive theological issues do not follow from the analytic style or ambitions, or from the intellectual culture in which they are nurtured, but will need to be arrived at through the process of theologizing.²⁵

Despite all of this flexibility, Vanhoozer worries that the style and ambitions of the analytic theologian places an unhelpful limitation on the task of theology. In particular, Vanhoozer worries that the analytic approach to doctrine is not fit for realizing the normative goal of theology: the appropriation of wisdom. To this worry we now turn.

¹⁹ Crisp, “Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology”, 163.
²⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre characterizes an intellectual tradition in these terms: “an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretive debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted.” McIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?, 12.
²¹ Crisp, “Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology”, 163.
²² Ibid.
²³ On the idea that analytic theologians must be “bilingual,” see Crisp, “Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology”, and Wood, “Analytic Theology as a Way of Life”.
²⁵ See Rea’s “Introduction” for a discussion of this point.
2 Vanhoozer’s concern about analytic theology

In the article, “Love’s Wisdom: The Authority of Scripture’s Form and Content for Faith’s Understanding and Theological Judgment,” Vanhoozer puts forward what might be described as a three-part argument against the fecundity of analytic theology. First, there is the defense of his “primary thesis,” namely, that “biblical authority is a matter not only of revealed information (i.e. propositions) but also of larger-scale patterns of information processing (i.e., poetics). As the supreme norm for Christian wisdom, Scripture has sapiential authority”—roughly, that which “helps form sinners into mature disciples who learn how to exercise good theological judgment and practice ... as they grow up in every way into Christ (cf. Eph. 4:15).”26 Second, and as a secondary aim, Vanhoozer contends that this “sapiential” conception of authority has an implication for the task of theology that is particularly important. Following the pattern laid out in Scripture, the theologian should make it her task qua theologian to do more than “inform (i.e., state truth via conceptual analysis);” she also should aim “to form and transform (i.e., shape lives via imaginative appropriation).”27 Theology attuned to this sapiential task will be “a matter of thinking biblically, along the grain as it were of the various forms of biblical discourse, in ways that both (propositionally) inform the mind’s thoughts and (poetically) form the heart’s desires.”28 Finally, Vanhoozer indicates that this sapiential understanding of theology’s task highlights an important respect in which theology done in the analytic mode is incomplete or reductionistic. The central criticism is that the tools of the analytic trade are well-suited for “conceptual clarification,” “explanation,” and “propositional knowledge,” but ill-equipped for engendering “personal appropriation” and “sapiential understanding.”29 In this section, I exposit Vanhoozer’s three-part argument.

2.1 The sapiential authority of Scripture

Vanhoozer argues that biblical authority—“Scripture’s rightful say-so”—is not only a matter of what it said but also how things are said.30 In other words, biblical authority is both a matter of content as well as literary form. There are at least two interrelated reasons for this.

First, “God stoops to employ various ordinary forms of human discourse as the medium for his own communicative action,”31 and because of this, the reader of Scripture is obliged “to respond to everything the [divine] author is doing” with the presentation of the message.32 With approval, Vanhoozer quotes the analytic philosopher of art Peter Lamarque: “A good reader attends not to some content beyond or behind the mode of presentation but to the mode of presentation itself, to the fact that what is being said is being said in this way.”33 The thought, then, is that God has chosen to speak “through just these texts, in just these forms,”34 and, because of this, the theologian who overlooks the literary forms of Scripture misses something central about what God aims to do with Scripture. Stronger: the theologian who ignores the literary forms of Scripture misses much of what God authoritatively aims to communicate.

Second, Scripture’s theological content is not separable from its literary forms—at least not always. Vanhoozer explains why he believes this be the case.

26 Vanhoozer, “Love’s Wisdom”, 251. Unless otherwise stated, all quoted emphases come from the quoted author.
28 Ibid., 249-250.
29 Ibid., 259. It should be clear that Vanhoozer’s primary goal is not to argue against analytic theology, but to commend a particularly robust conception of biblical authority that has implications (in his view) for how theology should be done. In the defense of this thesis, however, Vanhoozer indicates that the implications for how theology should be done are at odds with the natural tendency of theology done in the analytic mode.
31 Ibid., 251.
32 Ibid., 252.
Literary forms are less containers than lenses: they do not simply deliver information but are rather means of information processing that organize the data in meaningful patterns. This ability to process information in particular (e.g., narrative) ways may be as important as the information itself. In such cases, the content is the form (i.e., pattern). One cannot reduce a form to its informative content, then, without losing the very pattern of information processing.\(^{35}\)

Jesus’ parables, for example, are not just about (or even primarily about) the presentation of new information, “but a new habit of conception: think (and feel) the kingdom of God to be like this.”\(^{36}\)

Vanhoozer believes that there is much at stake here. “What one misses in neglecting the Bible’s literary forms is wisdom, the ability to employ knowledge for discernment, good judgment, and right living.”\(^{37}\) This is because these forms often “do not merely transmit information but form the ways we process that information, establishing a normative point of view that trains us to see/taste as.”\(^{38}\) The situation is analogous to reading rich novels that cultivate “empathy and sympathy for people in particular situations, the sine qua non for being attuned to the complexities of real life and hence for judging and acting appropriately.”\(^{39}\) In addition, the literary forms of Scripture nurture the reader’s capacity for imagination, which “is the power of synoptic vision that creates and perceives meaningful patterns.”\(^{40}\) “The imagination,” we are told, “is reason in a synthetic mood.”\(^{41}\) This capacity for imagination is especially important for wisdom since wisdom is “neither a matter of the properties of propositional beliefs, nor ... of the relations among such beliefs [but rather] a matter of grasping the whole of reality.”\(^{42}\)

While “Each literary form [of Scripture] contributes to [the] pedagogical project [of] forming the knowledge and love of God,” it is particularly important for the theologian seeking wisdom to attend to the overarching drama or story of Scripture: the theodrama.\(^{43}\) For the theodrama provides the “overarching form that coordinates the various forms of biblical discourse, the ‘form of forms’ in which other biblical genre live and move and have their saying.”\(^{44}\) Thinking in terms of the theodrama trains theologians to see “that there are biblical texts whose meanings are only fully ‘realized’ as something is done with them,” and it thereby invites “disciples both to understand and participate in the ongoing theodrama.”\(^{45}\) Thus, thinking in terms of the theodrama provides “the large-scale pattern of information processing and wisdom-formation for which we have been looking.”\(^{46}\)

To sum up the argument thus far, “Form and content work together, both to teach us concepts (i.e., convey information) and shape our conceptions (i.e., process information).” The result is that the Bible’s authority is not only propositional [...] but judgmental: its authority is a matter not only of discrete bits of information but the ways in which we group them into meaningful patterns, evaluate, and look through them. It is for the sake of forming right judgments that we must view biblical authority in other than merely propositionalist terms.\(^{47}\)

In a nutshell, God, through Scripture, authoritatively aims to communicate not just propositional knowledge to his followers but also wisdom; and one of the ways (if not the primary way) in which God communicates wisdom is through the literary forms of Scripture as they are couched within their theodramatic context.

In my judgment, Vanhoozer’s sapiential conception of biblical authority is a plausible one, certainly worthy of further theological exploration. As far as I can discern, moreover, there is nothing about

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\(^{35}\) Ibid., 256.  
^{36}\) Ibid., 257.  
^{37}\) Ibid., 250.  
^{38}\) Ibid., 257. In the quote above, Vanhoozer is referring to narratives in particular, but elsewhere he says that “Each literary form contributes to a pedagogical project: forming the knowledge and love of God” (Ibid., 253).  
^{40}\) Ibid., 254.  
^{41}\) Ibid., 255.  
^{42}\) Ibid., 254-255. The quote comes from Zagzebski, Virtues of the Mind, 50.  
^{44}\) Ibid., 257.  
^{45}\) Ibid.  
^{46}\) Ibid., 258.  
^{47}\) Ibid., 266.
Vanhoover’s proposal that the analytic theologian qua analytic needs to feel any pressure to resist. On the contrary, analytic philosophers and theologians have done fine work on wisdom, literary genre, and the forms of Scripture. Indeed, within the article, Vanhoozer favorably cites the likes of Richard Swinburne, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Linda Zagzebski—authors who might be classified as paradigmatic analytic theologians—on topics such as literary form and the nature of Scripture and the nature of wisdom. I see no reason to suppose that this work could never be utilized in a way that is consonant with Vanhoozer’s proposal. To avoid confusion, furthermore, it’s worth reiterating that Rea’s P3 is not meant to forbid the theologian from analyzing metaphor and other tropes, nor does it prohibit the theologian from utilizing literary forms in an evocative manner. If McCall’s discussed understanding of Rea’s P3 is correct, it’s only meant to keep the theologian from allowing unspecified (and unspecifiable) metaphor and other tropes to carry the bulk of the argument (if you’ll permit the use of the metaphor), when other more informative statements are available. So, initially, there seems to be no opposition between Vanhoozer’s sapiential conception of biblical authority and the theology done in the analytic mode (even if it’s granted that analytic theologians should pay much more attention to the theodrama than they have at present). At most Vanhoozer provides a minor corrective to certain features of the analytic intellectual culture—but such correctives are a reoccurring feature of intellectual cultures, which are ever-changing.

Vanhoozer appears to think otherwise, however. It is one thing to analyze the literary forms of Scripture and their ability to foster wisdom, quite another to theologize in a manner that respects these forms (and “the form of forms,” the theodrama) and illumines the path of wisdom. While the former kind of analysis might be within the analytic theologian’s wheelhouse, Vanhoozer worries the latter manner of theologizing is not. This latter limitation is problematic, however, since, in Vanhoozer’s view, theology should combine “a concern for sensitivity to Scripture’s literary forms” with “wisdom-formation.” But analytic theologians routinely overlook the fact that “wisdom is the end of theology,” and instead preoccupy themselves with mere “conceptual clarification,” “explanation,” and “propositional knowledge.”

Two questions immediately surface concerning this sapiential conception of theology. First, how might theology be conducted in a wisdom-forming manner? Second, why suppose that such a way of doing theology cannot be thoroughly analytic? We shall consider these questions in turn.

2.2 Theology as sapiential theology

According to Vanhoozer, a significant challenge facing the theologian is “knowing how to move from biblical to theological discourse in a way that rightly respects how what is said is said.” Vanhoozer’s own answer to this challenge is first to acknowledge that it “is a short-circuited view of the economy of communication to think that theology’s task is done when it sets forth a coherent account” of the true propositions found within Scripture. Rather, “Theology’s vocation is to minister understanding and nurture faith, employing Scripture as the uniquely authoritative text for the project of repairing human knowledge and love of God.”

In a word, “wisdom is the end of theology.”

48 Ibid., 264.
49 Ibid., 257.
50 Ibid., 255.
51 See, in particular, Clark, “Beyond Inerrancy: Speech Acts and an Evangelical View of Scripture”, 113-134.
52 Also, as mentioned earlier, analytic theologians disagree with one another about the place and function of metaphor within the process of theologizing.
54 Ibid., 258.
55 Ibid., 257.
56 Ibid., 259.
57 Ibid., 262.
58 Ibid., 265.
59 Ibid., 265.
60 Ibid., 257.
Crucial for theology’s wisdom is the notion of right judgment, “the ability to tell true from false, good from bad, valid from invalid, beautiful from ugly, part from whole.” Vanhoozer expounds upon the idea of judgment by contrasting it with assent to a proposition.

To assent to a proposition is to say “Yes.” This is a prodigious affair. Unlike propositions, which belong to no one in particular, judgments are personal. They are acts that involve a degree of personal commitment, acts for which we are answerable. One who judges is more like an actor than a spectator. [...] Judgment is the *phronesis* of which Paul speaks when he calls disciples to live as citizens worthy of their calling to the gospel (Phil. 3:20; 1:27).

So, it would seem, judgments, unlike mere assent to a proposition, must involve personal commitment and must be related to practical action in some way.

Good *theological* judgment in particular “is the ability to make decisions about biblical meaning.” This includes grasping the proposition conveyed by a particular biblical author, what the author is doing with the relevant literary form (which may be extra-propositional), and how a section of Scripture fits within “the big theodramatic picture.” Good theological judgment is largely a matter of being apprenticed to what Scripture says (and how it says it)—of having one’s capacity for judging formed and transformed by the Spirit via the ensemble of canonical discourse that constitute the Old and New Testament. Thus, the theologian must be adept at theologizing in a manner that does not lose sight of how the literary forms of Scripture and the accompanying propositions “form a meaningful though mysterious whole” that speak to “what the people of God are to say and do in order rightly to respond [...] in ways that fit one’s contemporary context.”

Theology’s proper work is not merely reiterative summation but “reconstructive science,” the conceptual reformulation of the normative judgments that underlie the diverse expressions and forms of biblical discourse. We achieve theodramatic understanding—the ability to make right judgments about the meaning of what God has said/done and what we must say/do in response—by acquiring habits of canonically normed theological judgment (i.e., wisdom).

In short, the theologian should exercise her craft in a way that communicates true propositions and fosters wisdom as gleaned from the whole of Scripture (the theodrama), including how the parts and literary forms factor into that whole.

### 2.3 Sapiential theology and the inadequacy of analytic theology

Suppose that the analytic theologian finds this rich and holistic vision for theology attractive. Is there anything about it that would require this theologian to break ties, at least in part, with her analytic proclivities? Vahoozer indicates that the answer is yes. The primary reason for this is that theology that is properly analytic excels at breaking things down into clean propositions and bite-size concepts; it’s not good at habituating the theologian to form large-scale patterns of information processing. Why? Because the “analytic or critical impulse is to break things up into their component parts.” What is lacking or underdeveloped within the analytic approach is the synthetic power of imagination, which “creates and perceives meaningful patterns.”

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61 Ibid., 251.
62 Ibid., 265-266.
63 Ibid., 257.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 254.
68 Ibid.
It should not be missed that Vanhoozer does maintain that there is a great deal of value in the analytic impulse. He reckons that the analytic procedure is “a vital tool of biblical reasoning,”69 and he asserts that “hermeneutical theologians often neglect the salutary resources of conceptual elaboration”70 that analytic theologians provide. Still, Vanhoozer worries that analytic theologians often fail to move beyond the necessity of the analytic mode and into the imaginative, which is crucial for wisdom: “Theologians must do more (but not less!) than distil clear propositions from texts in order to assess their cogency. Conceptual clarity is only the penultimate stage on the road to wisdom.”71 Moreover, the analytic preoccupation with “conceptual clarification,” “explanation,” and “propositional knowledge” has exegetical implications,72 as “Analytic theologians often underestimate the scope of the hermeneutical task of extracting propositions from long stretches of discourse.”73 This is “because the conceptual tools of the Anglo-American analytic trade are better suited to sentence-long discourse than to discerning propositions in larger discursive forms.” But “theology requires large-scale, imaginative biblical thinking as well.”74

Why maintain that the analytic mode is only/mostly about breaking things down into concepts and propositions at the expense of the described imaginative capacities? Vanhoozer does not say exactly. At first blush this appears to be a major oversight as analytic theologians rarely (if ever) describe their projects in the terms of the piecemeal demolition process presented by Vanhoozer. Consider one of the first articulations of analytic theology by Oliver Crisp. He begins on a note that bears a striking resemblance to Vanhoozer’s depiction of analytic theology.

On one way of characterizing the analytic philosophical project problems are broken down into their constituent parts, analysed, and then reformed in an argument that attempts to make sense of the original problem. Here the analytic philosopher is rather like a mechanic who decides to strip an engine down in order to understand why it is making a peculiar rattling sound. He analyses the parts of the engine, cleans them up, and then reassembles the machine having satisfied himself that he has addressed the problem so that the engine will work properly once reformed.75

Crisp raises this way of thinking about the analytic project for the purpose of showing that it’s no longer the primary way in which analytic philosophers view their craft, and moreover, it’s not the approach that analytic theologians should adopt.

Something of this approach [i.e., the one just described] can still be detected in contemporary analytic philosophy. But, without qualification, this picture could be misleading. It suggests the sort of analysis in vogue during the 1950s, when the subject matter of Anglo-American philosophy was ordinary language [...] Such ordinary-language philosophers had little time for metaphysics (or theology, for that matter). But, arguably, contemporary analytic philosophy is more concerned with building metaphysical worldviews than analysing problems (in this narrow, linguistic sense at least), as philosophers in this tradition did during the heyday of ordinary-language philosophy. [...] Metaphysics is once again a central concern of philosophers in the Anglo-American tradition. [...] I shall take analytic theology to be concerned with analysis in this ‘metaphysical’ sense—not in the narrower, linguistic sense applied to the earlier phases of analytic philosophy.76

Similarly, and within the same original collection of essays, Rea says that analytic theologians should pursue the task of “clarifying, systematizing, and model-building” the doctrines of the faith.77 Are not Rea and Crisp calling for the same imaginative skills that Vanhoozer celebrates? And if so, does Vanhoozer’s criticism rest upon a mistake?

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69 Ibid., 260, n. 58.
70 Ibid., 260.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 259.
73 Ibid., 260.
74 Ibid., 260, n. 58.
76 Ibid.
Regarding both questions, the answer is probably not—at least not entirely. Analytic theologians do prize a kind of imagination (in Vanhoozer’s sense), systemization, and model-building, but they tend to limit their engagement in such endeavors to one or two issues or doctrines at a time, and, more to the point, two leading analytic theologians expressly deny that theology is about the acquisition of wisdom. Here is what Rea has to say on the matter of theology and wisdom.

Analytic theologians (as human beings) need to seek [wisdom]; but, as I said in the volume [Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology], analytic philosophy and analytic theology are the wrong places to look for [wisdom]. And, truth be told, I think that so-called continental philosophy is also the wrong place. In a slogan, contemporary philosophy in general is a bad place to look for wisdom. In that respect, the discipline (at least as it is currently practiced) is misnamed. But these are ruminations for another place. The basic point here is that analytic tools are for theory building, and not much more than that. They are very good for that limited purpose and should not be expected to do more.78

Rea indicates that there is nothing about analytic theology that makes it a worse candidate for the pursuit of wisdom than other forms of theological discourse.79 He just doubts that academic theology is the kind of enterprise for inculcating wisdom. As far as texts go, Rea’s advice is to look not to a book of philosophy or theology for wisdom but to Scripture itself.80

Crisp’s reflections on the relationship between analytic theology and wisdom come in response to Ray Paul Bitar, who raises a concern similar to that of Vanhoozer’s. Crisp says,

Bitar worries about the fact that wisdom is not necessarily an ambition of the method of analytic theology. But wisdom is not the same as knowledge or truth. Theology aims at truth—or so it seems to me. Theologians aim to increase their body of knowledge about God. Analytic theologians do this through reflection upon the testimony of Scripture and the Christian tradition—in other words, upon the data of revealed theology (broadly construed). The analytic theologian in pursuit of such a task may be furnished with a body of truth and yet foolish (in the biblical sense of someone lacking moral fiber or direction). Being in possession of a substantial body of theological truth does not necessarily make one wise. But that is not so surprising, is it? I can know a lot about all sorts of things and have true beliefs about a wide range of issues and yet fail to be wise. Perhaps I know that smoking will severely damage my health. Yet I take up this habit because I want to look like James Dean when hanging out with friends at a drive-in cinema on a Friday night. Wisdom requires something more than a body of knowledge or warranted beliefs. Theology itself cannot make one wise; but it can give one the tools with which to pursue wisdom. The analytic theologian is doing no more than this, I think.81

Like Rea, Crisp does not seem to think that analytic theology is at a disadvantage when it comes to fostering wisdom. Theology simply is not the right kind of endeavor for that task. But Crisp proposes that analytic theology can furnish knowledge (and, we might add, ways of reasoning) that aid the pursuit of wisdom.

So, there appears to be a clear point of difference between Vanhoozer and two significant analytic theologians, Rea and Crisp. But might the analytic theologian agree with Vanhoozer that theology should be sapiential? Let’s consider the proposition.

3 Analytic theology as sapiential theology

To determine whether the analytic theologian might do theology within the vein that Vanhoozer prescribes, we first must come to a better understanding of what it might mean to engage in sapiential theology. There is much that could be discussed here; we will content ourselves with just four initial points. After we do this, we will be in position to see how the practices affiliated with analytic theology as well as the understanding furnished by it can be sapiential.

80 Ibid., 18-19.
3.1 Four clarifications regarding sapiential theology

First, what does it mean for theology to be about wisdom-formation? As we have seen, Vanhoozer defines wisdom as “the ability to employ knowledge for discernment, good judgment, and right living.”\(^{82}\) Notice the modal qualifier: wisdom is “the ability” to employ knowledge in particular ways. What is not included in this definition of wisdom is the idea that one mostly/exclusively behaves in ways that never veer from the path of wisdom.\(^{83}\) Taken in conjunction with Vanhoozer’s claim that theology is “the end of wisdom,”\(^{84}\) theology would be seen as a discipline that equips individuals (and communities) with the ability to live wisely, not the actuality of wise living, by directing one’s attention to how one should live (or their attention to how they should live). This conception of theology’s task seems to be considerably more plausible than the alternative thesis that theology makes one live as one should (at least absent the controversial idea that wise judgments determine wise behavior). If this reading of Vanhoozer is correct (i.e., if it is right to suggest that Vanhoozer intends for the modal qualifier to be present), then it looks as if Crisp and Vanhoozer may not be too far apart in their understanding of what the study of theology can do for the theologian. Recall, Crisp says that possession of theological knowledge does not make someone live wisely. Instead, the best theology can do is “give one tools with which to pursue” wise living.\(^{85}\) The difference between Crisp and Vanhoozer on this score, if there is one at all, is that Vanhoozer, unlike Crisp, maintains that the very telos of Christian theology is to engender the ability to make wise (canonically-normed) theological judgments.

Second, does wisdom exclusively concern practical, means-end reasoning, or might it contain a theoretical knowledge component as well?\(^{86}\) It sometimes appears as if Vanhoozer maintains that wisdom must always and everywhere be oriented toward praxis alone. For example, he labels wisdom’s judgment a kind of phronesis,\(^{87}\) and he says that wisdom enables Christians “to put their knowledge of the love of God into practice.”\(^{88}\) At the same time, Vanhoozer does not shy away from saying that wisdom is about processing large swaths of information and that wisdom concerns “good aesthetic, moral, metaphysical, judicial, and doctrinal judgment.”\(^{89}\) But processing large quantities of information and making aesthetic and metaphysical judgments (to pick just two off Vanhoozer’s list) seem to be (mostly) theoretical enterprises. One way to weave together these apparently opposing strands within Vanhoozer’s paper is to keep in mind that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”\(^{90}\) For, presumably, part of the practice of glorifying and enjoying God wisely is loving and worshipping God accurately, with justified true beliefs, which will involve theoretical knowledge about the character and ways of God. Here theoretical knowledge serves the practice of glorifying and enjoying God. Or, to draw from my own Arminian-Methodist tradition, “For Arminius the most practical thing that any pastor could do was lead parishioners in authentic praise and worship of God, and the best way to do this was by formulating a theology that would prove to be foundational to such worship.”\(^{91}\) Recognizing that wisdom often contains a theoretical component helps us see that the earliest Christological and Trinitarian debates where not disconnected from the wise purposes of the Church. Vanhoozer would surely add that the “love and wisdom of God are not abstract notions; on the contrary, they are concretely embodied in the person, work, and history of Jesus Christ.”\(^{92}\) But seeking to keep one’s striving for theological

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83 On the other hand, there is some indication that Vanhoozer doesn’t mean to affirm the noted qualifier (e.g., “Love’s Wisdom”, 267). In other words, Vanhoozer can be read as claiming that the wise person is not one who merely has the ability to live rightly but in fact lives rightly.
84 Vanhoozer, “Love’s Wisdom”, 257.
85 Crisp, “Reason, Style, and Wisdom”, 613.
86 So far as I can tell, nothing I shall say turns on a fine-grained distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. Consequently, I will not offer such a distinction.
88 Ibid., 253. Emphasis mine.
89 Ibid., 259.
91 Gunter, Arminius and His Declaration of Sentiments, 162.
92 Vanhoozer, “Love’s Wisdom”, 274.
knowledge connected to the theodrama is not to say that theoretical knowledge is not worth pursuing, even essential to wisdom.

I mention this point about theoretical knowledge for the following reason. Analytic theology is often highly theoretical in nature. This can lead one to think that analytic theology cannot, in principle, be about wisdom precisely because of its theoretical bent. But that would be a mistake, for the reasons discussed.93

Third, does the search for wisdom look the same for each person, or will the path of wisdom contain different twists and turns depending upon the landscape in which one finds oneself? Less metaphorically: is it possible for two Christians, who are equally concerned about obtaining wisdom and equally gifted for the pursuit, to approach the pursuit in radically different ways, due, for example, to their distinct personalities or the circumstances in which they find themselves? It strikes me as obvious that the answer is yes. Though the highest good for each human is union with God, what it means to pursue this is often tailor-made to the particulars of one’s Sitz im Leben. Consider, by way of illustration, the art of teaching, say, history. Suppose that the highest value of teaching history is something like getting students to master a certain set of facts and to make well-formed judgments about the significance of certain historical events. Two professors can reach this end in dramatically different ways with more or less equal effectiveness, depending upon their distinct teaching philosophies, their personalities, and the kinds of students they have. Without sacrificing effectiveness, the approaches to lectures, classroom discussion, readings, and more besides can vary widely as can the content of the lectures, the discussion, the readings, and all the rest. So too, I submit, with sapiential theology. We can agree, for example, that the highest aim of theology is to enable us to love, worship, and serve God wisely, yet the theological methods we employ to reach this aim may vary, often (though not always) without loss of effectiveness. Might the analytic and non-analytic theologian often represent different manifestations of a fruitful sapiential theology, due in part to differences in culture, temperament, and intellectual needs?

Finally, does each theologian need to erect a comprehensive structure of wisdom that could in principle guide the Church in her multifaceted worship and service of God, or might a division of labor on this score be called for? To ask the question is to answer it. Certainly the Church requires the formation of wisdom to be a cooperative affair, funded by theologians, bishops, ministers, elders, evangelists, musicians, visual artists, and every member of the body of Christ. The acquisition of the wisdom is such a complex undertaking, all Christian disciples must do what they can to contribute. Might there be space for analytic and non-analytic theologians of various stripes to use their diverse interests and giftings to work together for the wisdom of the Church?

With these points before us, let’s now consider how analytic theology might be said to be a way of doing sapiential theology. In line with the first point above, let’s agree that analytic theology is sapiential not if it necessitates wise living among those who produce and receptively read it, but if it furnishes insights into wise living and the tools (e.g., intellectual abilities and emotional dispositions) by which to pursue such living. In step with the second point above, let’s not forget that wisdom can pertain to theoretical knowledge as well as the more obviously practical. I would like to suggest that analytic theology fosters habits and understanding, both of which facilitate wisdom. Let’s consider these in turn.

### 3.2 Analytic habits for wisdom

William Wood mentions four ways in which analytic theology fosters habits that help one acquire wisdom—at least when analytic theologizing is approached in a certain manner. First, there is attention. Wood asks us to reflect upon “the concentrated attention required to read, understand, and develop very technical analytic arguments.”94 Many have thought that such careful attention is a spiritual practice itself, or else applicable to the spiritual life. For example,

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93 On this topic, see Wood, “Analytic Theology as a Way of Life”, 43-60.
The French mystic Simone Weil holds that attention can be an implicit form of Christian prayer because it requires one to detach oneself from one's goals and biases in order to be fully receptive to the objects of our attention. She specifically describes the effort of working out a difficult proof in geometry as a kind of prayer, a way of worshipping God, the source of truth.95

The French scholar Pierre Hadot makes a similar point about Stoic spiritual exercises. Wood notes that Hadot discusses "reading, listening, and investigation as spiritual exercises," and Hadot "similarly presents speculative metaphysics as a spiritual practice that helps us see the world correctly, as a 'cosmic Whole,' and thereby orient ourselves properly within it." Finally, "many different religious traditions, both ancient and modern, also commend contemplative practices that cultivate attention and focused awareness." Hence, "there can be little dispute about the general claim that developing one's powers of attention can be a spiritual practice."96 But if this is so, we similarly should be inclined to say that the "intricate analytic proofs and metaphysical arguments" found in analytic theology can be spiritual practices, and thus, one thinks, wisdom-aiding.97

Next, Wood turns to "what may be regarded as the paradigmatic analytic virtue: argumentative transparency."98 Though the argumentative culture of analytic theology can tempt one toward an overly competitive pride, within that culture "one finds something that also looks like an inoculation against intellectual pride."99 Once one understands how to read analytic philosophy, which does take some getting used to, it is usually exceedingly easy to grasp the claims an author wants to make and the reasons he or she offers in support of those claims. This way of arguing, however, makes "it maximally easy for intellectual opponents to criticize or refute" the arguments offered.100 This way of proceeding it thus "a way of choosing to make oneself intellectually vulnerable, and a check against intellectual pride. In the proper spirit, it is a way of implicitly saying to the intellectual community 'If I am wrong, I am wrong in ways that I myself cannot see. Please help me to see them.'"101 Quite plausibly, this virtue of argumentative transparency, which is encouraged by the analytic intellectual culture, is a vital tool for obtaining wisdom.

Third, the analytic intellectual culture is a culture where charity towards the arguments of others is prized. In fact, it is "not uncommon for a philosopher [or analytic theologian] to try his or her best to make an opponent's argument stronger and better before criticizing it."102 This practice has important implications. To do it well, one has to be able to inhabit, at least for a time, not only an alternative point of view, but often a hostile point of view. The more easily one can inhabit the viewpoint of one's intellectual opponents, the better one can argue. By contrast, consider what it would be like to be completely unable to do this: one would be so locked in the certainty that one's own views are correct that one could not even imagine what it would be like for them to be wrong. Surely this is a kind of pride, a glorification of the self and its private projects. Conversely, when one can internalize and inhabit the voices of one's critics, the fixed, prideful self becomes unstable. In order to make this move at all, one must try to free oneself from one's own biases and assumptions in order to see the real force of the arguments.103

In a nutshell, the analytic intellectual culture is one that discourages the creation of strawmen and encourages the practice of imaginatively identifying with one's intellectual opponent, even as this means scrutinizing one's cherished beliefs. Certainly, however, such practices can only help the wisdom-seeker.

Finally, Wood discusses "an aspect of analytic philosophy, and therefore analytic theology, that is quite common, even though it is rarely discussed in print." This is that philosophers and theologians working on a complicated problem frequently experience "a sudden flash of insight, an 'ah ha' moment." "Such moments," Wood says, "seem to strike unexpectedly from 'outside,' as it were. They do not seem like a

95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 56.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid., 57.
103 Ibid.
predictable result of one’s own willful efforts.” Because of this, the analytic theologian or philosopher must cultivate the practice of waiting, patiently but actively, for insights.

Contrary to stereotypes, the philosopher does not merely lie on the couch looking at the ceiling or spend all day watching television while ‘waiting’ for the truth; rather, he or she reads, thinks, turns ideas over in his or her mind: this is hard work, to be sure, but it is also a form of waiting, and a form of passivity.

This kind of active waiting is something that is valuable for the Christian to cultivate.

We spend much of our lives, maybe all of our lives, actively waiting: for God, for grace, for Christ. On some construals, active waiting just is the Christian vocation. When we actively wait for philosophical insight, we participate in a pedagogical practice that is quasi-sacramental. Waiting for insight and cultivating an attitude of openness toward truth is also a way of training the mind and the will to wait actively for God’s grace.

Insofar as this form of active waiting contributes to the way of wisdom, we have a final habit associated with analytic theology that enables (or at least facilitates) wisdom.

Wood is clear that these four habits can be found in other theological communities or academic disciples. His argument is not directed against other disciplines or ways of doing theology. Instead, he simply argues, against those who would deny it, that analytic theology can be (and probably often is) spiritually nourishing and wisdom-assisting. If Wood is correct about the four habits he lists, then it looks as if analytic theology, if not sapiential theology itself, is intimately related to it, by means of producing habits that can aid one in one’s journey in wisdom.

3.3 Analytic theology, understanding, and wisdom

A casual glance at the analytic theological literature reveals a preoccupation with building models of particular doctrines. One finds models of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Eucharist, the doctrine of Hell, and more besides. Considerably less attention is paid to ethics, politics, and other “practical” issues. This is an imbalance that I would like to see corrected (though I don’t believe we can think enough about the topics listed), and I am confident that it will be in the near future. There is, after all, a lot of excellent work by analytic philosophers in such areas, and I suspect that it is only a matter of time before analytic theological ethics and like sub-disciplines are up and running. But even if that is mistaken, I would like to suggest that the current preoccupation with theoretical, often highly speculative, model-building by analytic theologians can be genuine instances of sapiential theology. At the very least, analytic model-building can contribute to wisdom in that it can strengthen the theologian’s love of God and devotion to him.

By way of illustration, consider the mystery of the Trinity. Nearly every analytic theologian of which I am aware believes that the doctrine of the Trinity is indispensable to the Christian faith and should be affirmed even if not completely understood. Nevertheless, the doctrine can appear incoherent, or else so obscure that it is difficult to know even what is being affirmed. Yet both phenomena pose a challenge to worshipping and loving God as Trinity.

Let’s begin with the challenge of explicating the doctrine of the Trinity in a coherent way. Some find it difficult sincerely to worship God as triune if they aren’t confident that the doctrine of the Trinity is coherent. Certainly, this can be due to the (hopeless) Cartesian quest for certainty or to the (misguided) Enlightenment

104 Ibid., 58.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
109 Dale Tuggy’s “biblical Unitarianism” is the exception that proves the rule. See, e.g., “Divine Deception and Monotheism”, 186-209, and “Who Should Christians Worship?”, 5-33.
impulse to eliminate all mystery, though neither represents the mindset of the overwhelming majority of analytic theologians. But this difficulty with worship may also be born out of the virtue of wanting to ensure, to the degree that is feasible, that one is structuring her life around that which is true and good rather than that which is merely preferred. After all, evidence of incoherence is evidence of falsehood.

Analytic models of the Trinity can be of help here. The speculative models of the Trinity that one finds in the analytic theological literature can help the theologian see ways in which the doctrine of the Trinity might be true by providing ways of thinking about the Trinity that appear to be internally coherent (i.e., free from internal contradiction), compatible with Scripture and the great creeds of the faith, and theologically fruitful (e.g., helps the theologian see how the eternal generation of the Son or intra-Trinitarian love is possible). It often does not matter whether or not one thinks that her preferred model of the Trinity is true in all of its fine-grained detail; the theologian might hold that the model is at best an approximation to the truth, or she might be agnostic about whether or not the model approximates the truth, or she might be skeptical that it does at all. Again, what often matters is that it represents a coherent way of thinking about God that helps the theologian see how the doctrine might or could be true—at least insofar as we believe that internally coherent and theologically fruitful models of God’s tri-unity that are compatible with Scripture and the great creeds provide evidence that the doctrine of the Trinity could be true. But evidence that something could be true can overcome concerns about the Trinity’s coherence, which can empower the theologian to worship God more confidently and freely. I know people (including non-academics) for which this is the case.

Consider, next, the idea that the doctrine of the Trinity can appear so obscure that it is difficult to know even what is being affirmed.110 This is problematic for the love and worship of God since, plausibly, one cannot love and worship that which is entirely/mostly unknown. But if that is true, and if the doctrine of the Trinity is (mostly) obscure, the Christian cannot worship God as Trinity. To be sure, the Christian can still worship God as known (in part)—as loving, omniscient, and so on—but not as Trinity, if what it means to be Trinity is (largely) obscure. If it’s too strong to claim that one cannot love and worship that which is entirely/mostly unknown, it nevertheless remains fair to say that knowledge of God can facilitate the love and worship of him—or so I would think.

Models of the Trinity can help theologians make sense of what they are worshipping when they worship God as Trinity. For these models typically spell out what “person,” “substance,” and like notions mean, and how they together constitute a viable understanding of the Trinity. Insofar as one thinks that a particular model approximates the truth, or that aspects of one or more models do so, the theologian can maintain that she has some understanding of what it means for God to be triune. This, in turn, can aid her worship of God as Trinity, if not make it possible in the first place.111 Once again, I know people for whom this is the case.

Now for the main point of application. If one produces or examines models of the Trinity for the purpose of worshipping God more accurately or wholeheartedly, then this is to engage the discipline of theology in a sapiential manner. It also should be noted that the theologian who affirms a model of the Trinity for the purpose of worshipping God more accurately or wholeheartedly is not merely assenting to a proposition or a group of them. Rather, this theologian makes a theological judgment in Vanhoozer’s sense of the word, where judgments are “acts that involve a degree of personal commitment.”112 The production and examination of models of the Trinity can (and probably often do) involve both head and heart.

Some theologians might find that they can’t resonate with this. They are perfectly comfortable leaving the doctrine of the Trinity a mystery and don’t know why one would go through the trouble of building models of the doctrine that at best approximate the truth. My response to such individuals is to repeat the

110 Relevant here are the words Gregory of Nyssa: “We must [...] more carefully examine the name of ‘Godhead,’ in order to obtain, by means of the significance involved in the word, some help towards clearing up the question before us.” See Gregory’s To Ablabius, 332.

111 But isn’t worshipping God according to our models idolatry? For resources for addressing this question, see Wood’s “Modeling Mystery”, 121.

earlier point that it is possible for wisdom to take different theologians down rather different paths. For some, reading and writing about models of the Trinity is a spiritually invigorating exercise. For others, these activities are experienced as dull and without spiritual fruit. Such is to be expected. Given that theologians with different personalities find themselves in radically different circumstances, we should not be surprised that their interests and even their spiritual needs differ. For the good of the Church as a whole, some plurality of theological pursuits should be respected, even encouraged.

I have chosen analytic models of the Trinity to illustrate the point that analytic theology can be sapiential theology. Of course, it is compatible with the Christian analytic theological movement to maintain that the project of building models of the Trinity has been an abject failure, and that it’s wiser for the theologian to expend her energy elsewhere. But if what I say about the Trinity is on target, then it looks as if one of the most speculative and often technical enterprises within the analytic theological literature can be sapiential. Yet if this is so, then less speculative and non-technical manifestations of analytic theology probably can be sapiential as well, when approached in the right way. And even if the example of the Trinity was a poor one (because, for example, it is thought that the models of the Trinity do more harm than good), I hope it’s clear how analytic model building in principle can be an instance of sapiential theology (even if the model building should be kept to other theological domains).

Suppose that one is willing to grant the point about what doctrinal models can do for the Christian wisdom-seeker. Still, someone might worry that analytic theologians have a built-in tendency to treat one or two theological issues at a time, when the theological task (often) requires comprehensive system-building of the kind that entails treating several issues at once. The tendency is “built-in” because analytic theologians like to proceed by breaking things down into bite-size concepts before constructing the whole. But few are able to engage in large-scale building projects when there is such attention to detail. It might be said that the analytic theologian is predisposed to sacrifice scope for depth.

Though this might be generally true, I know of two well-published analytic theologians who are seriously considering writing comprehensive systematic theologies. We can examine the fruit of analytic theology at a wide-ranging systematic level if and when these works appear in print. In the meantime, I’m happy to grant that the tendency (not requirement) of the analytic theologian is to aim for depth at the cost of scope and that scope is sometimes precisely what is needed for the life of wisdom. But this doesn’t mean that analytic theology has little (or even less) to offer the Church. Recall the point previously made that the acquisition of wisdom is a massively comprehensive affair that requires a division of labor. I submit that this task requires some who enjoy erecting gigantic edifices that will give us all a place to meet, discuss, and do business together as well as those who enjoy testing the foundation and the joints of such edifices to ensure that these superstructures are sound and will hold-up for future generations. The Church needs a variety of kinds of theologians, and insofar as the analytic theologian tends to be the latter and the non-analytic theologian (of a certain persuasion) the former, the two kinds of theologians should learn to appreciate the distinctive contributions that the other brings to the Church.

So, for the good of the Church and the world, let us appreciate one another as we diligently co-labor for a robust, coherent, and intellectually satisfying theology that is grounded in the theodrama and has the “capacity to reform our hearts and minds, to train us in righteousness, and to make us fit dwelling-places for the form of Christ, love’s wisdom incarnate.”

References


113 On the other hand, if St. Thomas is something of a proto-analytic theologian (a label, I understand, that many Thomists would eschew), then, clearly, there is no incompatibility between comprehensive systems and the analytic procedure (at least for the remarkably talented).


Crisp, Oliver D. “Analytic Theology as Systematic Theology,” *Open Theology* 3 (2017), 156-166.


