



An Invitation to
ANALYTIC
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY

Thomas H. McCall

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Christian Theology*

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"This timely and engaging book, written by one of today's leading practitioners of analytic theology, is a must-read for anyone interested in a careful, clear and accessible introduction to that burgeoning field."

— **Michael Rea**, professor of philosophy, University of Notre Dame

“Analytic theology isn’t spiritually edifying”?

William Wood notes that “many conventional theologians remain deeply suspicious of analytic theology” because of the worry that analytic theology is not spiritually edifying. As these theologians see matters, “genuine theology is in the first instance practical: aimed not at explanatory theories about God, but at fostering greater love for God and neighbor. Genuine theology, in short, is *praxis*, one deeply woven together with a Christian life of prayer, virtue, and participation in the sacraments.” The basic concern is this: when more mainstream theologians look at analytic theology, they don’t recognize the kind of theology-as-praxis that they value. Instead, they see purported explanatory theories — *mere* purported explanatory theories. Sometimes these explanations appear to be a very long way indeed from the life of faith. Indeed, they see formulas such as this (selected pretty much at random from among many others):

P: $\exists x (Dx \ \& \ \forall y (Dy \Rightarrow Byx)) \ \& \ x \text{ made us};$

Q: $\exists x (Dx \ \& \ \forall y (Dy \Rightarrow Byx)).$

When they encounter this kind of work, some theologians don’t recognize it as theology at all. If they are willing to recognize it as theology, they tend to worry that they don’t see the kind of theology that promotes love of God and neighbor; they are concerned that they don’t see theology that is connected to the life of faith. As Wood puts it, they worry that “analytic theology is spiritually sterile and therefore not really a form of genuine theology at all.”

I think this is an important point of criticism, and it raises some very intriguing concerns. But as Wood also notes, it would be a “mistake, and furthermore a presumptuous mistake, to assume that analytic philosophical theology cannot in principle be spiritually nourishing.” Three points stand out. First, it is important to realize that the temptation to construct explanatory theories about God that are divorced from worship and transformation is both real and present. It is also nefarious. The temptation besets theologians of all stripes — analytic or otherwise. I do not think analytic theologians are the only theologians who face this temptation. To the contrary, idolatry is no respecter of ideologies. But surely it is not invincible; surely — by God’s grace — it is not irresistible. As Wood reminds us, “God’s love rains down on logicians too, after all.”

Second, there is good reason to think that analytic theology may — contrary to common expectations — turn out to be spiritually edifying. Wood argues that analytic theology may be spiritually beneficial in several ways. He suggests that the “concentrated attention required to read, understand, and develop very technical analytic arguments” may be conducive to the kinds of intellectual virtues and habits of mind that are spiritually beneficial. In addition,

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he notes, the “argumentative transparency” (what he terms the “paradigmatic analytic virtue”) may be helpful in spiritual formation. Wood readily admits that this tendency toward argumentative rigor can also feed a form of pride or even “intellectual violence,” but he also points out that to make a “good analytic argument is to make that argument maximally easy for intellectual opponents to criticize or refute,” and this very transparency makes it much harder to shield oneself from criticisms but instead is a way to “make oneself intellectually vulnerable.” In this way it serves as a “check against intellectual pride.” Moreover, the pace demanded by such rigor, and the modesty of the claims that are rendered defensible, have the potential to cultivate epistemic humility. Furthermore, another important feature of the analytic approach is the need to “identify imaginatively with one’s intellectual opponents”; this also, as Wood points out, forces us to inhabit a worldview that is not only foreign to our own but also sometimes hostile. In these ways, Wood argues, “analytic theology can become a spiritual practice: a way of seeking God, and of training the mind and the will to be open to grace.”

Finally, we should not neglect to notice those shining examples of theologians for whom analytic theology indeed is closely related to worship and spiritual nurture. Indeed, it would be hard not to notice them, for the tradition is rife with such theologians. A great many patristic and most scholastic (both medieval and early modern) theologians count as “analytic theologians.” For surely they fit our profile of theologians who prize “conceptual precision, rigor of argumentation, technical erudition, and an in-depth defense of an original worldview.” As an example, consider Anselm’s *Proslogion*. It is obvious that Anselm values precision and rigor, and he clearly intends to convey truth claims that he finds convincing. But as both Wood and Marilyn McCord Adams point out, this work is “meant to do more than communicate propositional truths”; for “it is meant to help reorient the wills of its readers, and help bring about effective and volitional change in them.” Despite important differences of style and substance, we could say much the same about many other figures (both well known and less so) as well: it is very difficult to read far into Bonaventure, Richard of St. Victor, Aquinas, Scotus, Vermigli, Perkins, Arminius, Turretin, Edwards, Wesley and many others without understanding that they are obviously concerned with both intellectual rigor and spiritual formation.

– Taken from Chapter One, “What Is Analytic Theology?”