

Thomas H. McCall. *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 192 pp. \$22.00 (paper).

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In his “Address to the Clergy,” John Wesley sets forth his vision for the ideal Anglican clergyman, the intellectual and spiritual qualities befitting of those seeking to minister in the context of eighteenth century England. Many of the qualities Wesley lists come as no surprise to seminarians today: a deep love and knowledge of Scripture, a working knowledge of biblical languages and church history, and a single-minded focus on the glorification of God and the salvation of souls. Yet a great many of the qualities and abilities he includes likely come as a shock to those training for ministry in the seminary context today. These include (but are not limited to): a solid grasp of formal logic and a demonstrable ability to follow a complex chain of philosophical reasoning (he even recommends studying geometry as an aid to clear and methodical reasoning), an acquaintance with metaphysics, and a thorough grasp of the history of Western philosophy (Wesley emphasizes the likes of Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Henry More, Nicolas Malebranche, and Samuel Clark).

By contrast, within many evangelical seminaries today there is an oft-repeated narrative that philosophy is—in some unspecified way—at best irrelevant, and at worst an enemy of the theological task. It is asserted (yet rarely argued) that the tools, methods, and aims of philosophy in the analytic tradition are antithetical to the tools, methods, and aims of the dogmatic task. In addition, many modern and contemporary theologians have, whether explicitly or implicitly, taken their philosophical cues more from philosophy as practiced in the continental tradition by the likes of Immanuel Kant, G.F. Hegel, and Martin Heidegger.¹

In the past few years an increasing number of Christian theologians have begun to mine the rich repository of analytic philosophical resources as an aid in the task of constructive dogmatics. In his recent book *An Invitation to Analytic Christian Theology*, evangelical theologian Thomas McCall (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School) offers a popular-level explication of this recent movement in Christian theology and a defense of the burgeoning field known as “analytic theology.”

In chapter one titled “What is Analytic Theology?”, McCall (relying heavily on the previous work of Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea) aims to get clear on the nature and parameters of analytic Christian theology, what precisely makes such a project *analytic* and distinctively *theological*. McCall argues that analytic Christian theology is *analytic* in so far as it employs the distinctive *style* and *ambition* of analytic

¹ See F.F. Reno, “Theology’s Continental Captivity,” *First Things* April (2006).

philosophy in general, and in particular a commitment to clarity and conceptual precision, parsimony of expression, and rigorous argumentation (17-24). As a way of doing Christian theology, analytic theology is *theological* in that “it will be grounded in the Christian Scriptures, it will be informed by the great tradition of doctrinal development, it will be ‘christologically normed’ and it will be culturally engaged” (22). McCall does an excellent job of carefully (and charitably!) addressing many of the most prominent misgivings/misunderstandings of analytic theology commonly voiced by his fellow contemporary theologians (25-35).

One of McCall’s central aims in chapter two, titled “Analytic Theology and Christian Scripture”, is to bring clarity to the underexplored interrelationship between philosophical and theological analysis and the task of biblical exegesis. McCall does an outstanding job of critically interacting with the many iterations of the core claim that Christian theology in the analytic mode is an unduly speculative form of theological reflection that proceeds without proper Scriptural mooring (39-55). Here and throughout the book McCall uses individual theological case studies—freedom of the will (more on this below), Christology, and original sin—to model how the resources of analytic philosophy can aid in the task of constructing theological views that are anchored in the biblical text.

In my estimation, chapter two includes one of the most stimulating discussions in the book, namely McCall’s detailed treatment of what it means for some theological proposal to be either “authorized” (i.e. “consistent”) or “unauthorized” (i.e. “inconsistent”) by Scripture (55-81). What precisely does one mean when one affirms that a certain theological position such as credobaptism is “biblical”, while another such as Pelagianism is “unbiblical”? It is here that McCall demonstrates the virtues of conceptual clarity and precision in the constructive theological task. He distinguishes between the following claims (55-6) regarding whether or not some proposition P is “really” authorized by Scripture (hence “RA”):

RA1: The Bible, properly (and theologically) interpreted, contains sentences that (assert propositions that) explicitly assert P.

RA2: The Bible, properly interpreted, contains sentences that entail P.

RA3: The Bible, properly interpreted, contains sentences that are consistent with P and suggest P.

RA4: The Bible, properly interpreted, contains sentences that do not entail $\sim P$ (or some Q that is inconsistent with P), and are consistent with P (but does not suggest P; merely is neutral with respect to P).

RA5: The Bible, properly interpreted, contains sentences that entail neither P nor $\sim P$ but suggests some Q that is inconsistent with P.

RA6: The Bible, properly interpreted, contains sentences which entail $\sim P$.

RA7: The Bible, properly interpreted, clearly contains sentences which assert $\sim P$.

RA8: The Bible, properly interpreted, includes sentences that assert P , and it includes sentences that assert $\sim P$ (i.e., the Bible, even properly interpreted, is contradictory).

RA1-RA8 captures the distinction between certain theological claims being *demanded by Scripture* (RA1-RA2), *consistent with Scripture* (RA3-RA4), or *inconsistent with Scripture* (RA5-RA8) (56). Consider some examples. Christian theologians in general argue that Holy Scripture explicitly teaches that God is incorporeal (RA1); Baptist theologians argue that Holy Scripture explicitly affirms, supports, or is consistent with a form of congregational church polity (RA1-RA4); Reformed and Lutheran theologians (and many more besides) argue that Holy Scripture teaches or is consistent with paedobaptism (RA2/RA3); Roman Catholic Theologians offer Scriptural texts they consider to either entail, or are consistent with and suggest the immaculate conception (RA2/RA4); and all orthodox Christians argue that the denial of Christ's divinity is inconsistent with the teaching of Holy Scripture (RA6/RA7).

McCall applies the above distinctions to claims made by certain Reformed theologians that compatibilism regarding human freedom—the view that human freedom and causal determinism are compatible—is demanded by Scripture (RA1/RA2) and is the only biblically authorized option for orthodox Christians. D.A. Carson, John Frame, and Scott Oliphint all emphatically claim that the denial of compatibilism is inconsistent with the clear teaching of Scripture (RA6/RA7); indeed, Carson maintains that “compatibilism is a necessary component to any mature and orthodox view of God and the world”.²

McCall rightly takes this claim to task. He demonstrates that the claim rests on (i) a deeply misguided understanding of compatibilism as it pertains to extant debates in free will, and (ii) the metaphysically heavyweight, extra-biblical assumption that “divine sovereignty” entails “divine determinism”, i.e. if God is in sovereign control over His creation then God must either *causally determine* each creaturely event or else that event is entirely *unplanned* by God (72). At the very most, what can be claimed for compatibilism about free will is that the teaching of Scripture is consistent with such a view and thus in no way precludes it as a live option for orthodox Christians (RA3/RA4). But this is a far cry from the much stronger claim that Scripture *demands* the truth of compatibilism at pains of heterodoxy (although McCall goes on to argue for the stronger claim that there is good reason to think compatibilism is inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture in the sense outlined by RA5).

In chapter three titled “Analytic Theology and the History of Doctrine”, McCall explores the relationship between the task of analytic theology and the historical development of Christian doctrine. While McCall argues that analytic theology cannot properly be reduced to historical theology, it must nevertheless be attuned to the history of orthodox Christian doctrine (as embodied in authoritative creeds and

² D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 54.

ecumenical councils) as a genuine theological norm (*norma normata*), albeit one that is always subordinate to Scripture as the sole fundamental theological norm (*norma normans*) as claimed by Protestants.

McCall examines two case studies that illustrate in detail how the project of analytic theology can aid in clarifying and defending a classical orthodox Christology in particular (only one of which I have space to address). The first case study involves the formulation of a biblically faithful, creedally orthodox, and philosophically tenable doctrine of the person of Christ as one divine person possessing both a human and a divine nature, where the natures are (according to the Chalcedonian definition, AD 451) “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction in natures being in no way annulled by the union.” Here McCall highlights contemporary work in the metaphysics of the incarnation that aims to rebut the “incoherence objection” or “the problem of incompatible predicates”: how is it possible for one and the same person—Jesus Christ—to be both *divine* (and thus immutable, impassible, eternal, omniscient, etc.) and *human* (and thus mutable, passible, temporal, limited in knowledge)?³

McCall underscores, and I wholeheartedly agree, that the project of analytic theology is at the very least one of *theological retrieval*; systematic theology in the analytic key (as understood above) has been the operative mode of theological reflection in many of the most vibrant periods in the history of Christian doctrine (medieval and post-reformation in particular). Thinkers as diverse as Athanasius, Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Francis Turretin, and Jonathan Edwards (among others) ought to be considered forerunners and practitioners of what currently falls under the label “analytic theology” in the Christian tradition.

The fourth chapter, “Analytic Theology for the Church and the World”, is devoted to showing how the task of Christian theology in the analytic mode ought not exist for its own sake as a purely academic exercise but, rather, to uphold the doctrinal integrity of the church in the face of pressing challenges. McCall once again illustrates this thesis by examining a particular case study, namely the recent challenge from evolutionary biology (population genetics) to the traditional and deeply entrenched understanding of a historical fall involving an original human pair as the progenitors of the rest of humanity (see Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam*). By way of conceptual precision and analysis, clarity, and rigor of argumentation, McCall demonstrates that many alleged purely empirical theories wielded against traditional Christian doctrine include a heavy dose of extra-scientific philosophical commitments that need to be evaluated in their own right. He argues that many alleged conflicts between science and traditional Christian doctrine are more akin to conflicts between “science-conjoined-to-certain-metaphysical-commitments” and traditional Christian theology. Analytic theology can help bring to light and critically evaluate these tacit philosophical commitments.

McCall closes the book with a delightful discussion of the proper ends and approach to “theological theology” (to adopt the late John Webster’s phrase) in

³ See Timothy Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology: A Philosophical Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) for an exemplary treatment of Christology carried out in the analytic key.

general and analytic theology in particular, chief among them being the glory of God and the health and integrity of the church. McCall calls for a broadening of the traditional areas of analytic theology to include both moral and political theology, and recommends expanding the dialogue to incorporate the ever-expanding global theological context as a way to help remedy our theological myopia in the West (152-9).

I conclude with some big-picture remarks about the project of analytic theology as outlined by McCall. McCall is at pains to underscore the multifaceted, interdisciplinary nature of analytic theology; to properly engage in the task of analytic theology—to avoid mere “armchair theology” as he says (22)—one must be attuned to biblical theology and exegesis (including the theological interpretation of Scripture) as well as the history and development of Christian doctrine and theological retrieval; one must “engage directly and charitably with the major figures and movements in modern and contemporary theology” (172), all the while keeping abreast with developments in contemporary analytic philosophy. While McCall admits such an encompassing task “looks unrealistic” (164) and that one need not be an expert in each of these various disciplines in order to positively contribute to the project of analytic theology, I worry that the specialization-driven nature of academia at present makes even mere competence in each of these areas highly unlikely for any single person.

Yet this is no reason to demur the prospects of forward progress in analytic theology. Rather, the interdisciplinary nature of (good) analytic theology places an even greater need on collaborative projects and joint endeavors among those working in these distinct disciplines; biblical theologians working alongside analytic metaphysicians on the nature of divine presence in the world; systematic theologians and metaethicists co-laboring on the intersection of Christology and normativity; New Testament scholars and historical theologians collaborating with analytic metaphysicians on the nature of union and participation with Christ. The list goes on. All in all, McCall is to be commended for casting a clear and robust vision of analytic theology for the days ahead.