

Not Merely Jabberwocky: The Meaningfulness of Theological Language and the Doctrine of Analogy

J. Neil Daniels

Abstract

This essay examines the meaningfulness of theological language by tracing three classical positions on predication—equivocalism, univocalism, and analogical realism—and arguing that Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of analogy, understood within a Protestant framework shaped by Calvin's concept of divine accommodation, provides the most defensible account of how finite human language genuinely refers to God. The logical positivist challenge is taken as a clarifying provocation rather than a decisive refutation, and the essay demonstrates that contemporary theological concessions, particularly the claim that human speech about God carries an inherent degree of falsehood, reproduce the positivist error under the guise of creaturely humility. Drawing on the *imago Dei* grounding of language, patristic precedent, and the canonical presupposition that divine self-disclosure in human words is genuinely cognitive rather than merely evocative, the essay defends analogical realism as the foundation adequate to sustain doctrinal precision, faithful prayer, and reverent worship. The practical stakes extend to every domain of theological work: where the theory of language fails, so eventually does the theology built upon it.

Keywords

theological language; doctrine of analogy; *analogia fidei*; equivocalism; univocalism; Thomas Aquinas; divine

accommodation; Calvin; accommodation; logical positivism; A. J. Ayer; *imago Dei*; negative theology; Maimonides; Duns Scotus; apophatic theology; Creator-creature distinction; philosophy of religion; systematic theology; theological methodology

Introduction

In 1871 Lewis Carroll published a poem that has haunted the philosophy of language ever since.¹ The opening stanza of “Jabberwocky” reads like perfectly formed English verse: syntactically impeccable, rhythmically satisfying, semantically vacuous.

*‘Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe.*

Every grammatical expectation is met. Nothing whatsoever is communicated. Carroll meant it as comedy. But roughly seven decades later, a group of philosophers turned the joke into a weapon, and their target was theology.

The logical positivists of the Vienna Circle, and their English-speaking inheritors in the 1940s and 1950s, argued that propositions are cognitively meaningful only if they can be verified or falsified by empirical observation. The English philosopher and logical positivist A. J. Ayer (1910–1989) pressed this principle with characteristic bluntness: theological claims are not false, they are nonsense.² Not even interesting nonsense. Just cognitively empty noise dressed up in grammar, about as meaningful as saying that “drogulus” created the universe. The German-language philosopher and major exponent of logical positivism, Rudolf Carnap (1891–

¹ Lewis Carroll, “Jabberwocky,” in *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (London: Macmillan, 1871).

² A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936). Ayer’s application of the verification principle to theological language appears most directly in ch. 6, “Critique of Ethics and Theology.”

1970), invented the predicates “teavy” and “toovy” precisely to illustrate the point—you can construct grammatically coherent sentences around undefined terms and produce the appearance of discourse where there is actually nothing.³ The implication was clear. “God is wise” stands closer to Carroll’s slithy toves than to genuine propositional content.

The logical positivist program eventually collapsed under its own weight. The verification principle is not itself empirically verifiable, which by its own terms makes it nonsense. Philosophers of language spent the better part of three decades dismantling the edifice, and by the time Wittgenstein’s later work had been absorbed into the discipline, the positivist stranglehold on meaning was broken. But the challenge did not simply disappear. It went underground. It resurfaces in watered-down forms whenever someone argues that theological language is “merely symbolic,” or that it “points toward” a reality it cannot actually describe, or that every predication of God carries an irreducible coefficient of error or falsehood. These positions are often presented as expressions of appropriate theological humility. They are not. They are versions of the positivist objection wearing a pious disguise. That is why the doctrine of analogy is not an optional refinement within systematic theology. It is a defense perimeter. And understanding it clearly matters far more than many working pastors and teachers seem to realize.

I. The Theological Starting Point: Language and the Imago Dei

A distinctly Christian account of theological language does not begin with epistemology. It begins with anthropology and

³ Rudolf Carnap’s invented predicates “teavy” and “toovy” appear in his essay “The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language” (1932), designed to demonstrate that grammatically well-formed sentences constructed from undefined terms carry no cognitive content.

revelation, and the order matters. The instinct to begin with epistemology—to ask first whether and how finite minds can know God before turning to what Scripture actually says about Him—already concedes too much to the philosophical agenda. The Christian starts elsewhere.

Human beings are constituted for linguistic communication. This capacity is reasonably understood as one dimension of the *imago Dei* in Genesis 1:26–28.⁴ The image is not reducible to language, but language is one of its irreducible expressions. What makes the Genesis account so striking is that the capacity for naming is not merely asserted; it is immediately dramatized. Adam names the animals in Genesis 2:19–20. This is not a trivial detail of narrative decoration. It establishes language as the medium through which human beings exercise creaturely dominion and engage the created order with conceptual precision. Language, on the biblical account, is a feature of the world as God made it. It belongs to the structure of creation, not to the distortions of the fall.

More decisive still: God Himself communicates in human language. He spoke creation into existence (Gen. 1). The eternal Logos became flesh and pitched His tent among us (John 1:1–14).⁵ The Holy Spirit inspired Scripture in three ordinary human languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek. Not in some elevated meta-language. Not in approximations that gesture toward a realm of pure meaning. In the common tongue of fishermen, merchants, and farmers. This is a theological given of the first order. The fit of human language for divine revelation is not a philosophical

⁴ The bearing of the “image and likeness” formula on human linguistic capacity has been widely noted in the Reformed and evangelical theological traditions.

⁵ In John’s Gospel, the Prologue’s identification of the eternal Logos with the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:1–14) is the canonical ground for affirming that divine self-disclosure in human language is not a deficient mode of revelation but the decisive mode of it.

achievement that theologians worked out over centuries of careful refinement. It is a presupposition of the canon itself.

Bruce Ashford and Keith Whitfield capture the relevant tension well: a “core element of a revelational epistemology is that God’s Word can/does bring trustworthy knowledge to his creatures,”⁶ yet the question presses: how does finite language adequately express truths about an infinitely majestic God? Gerald Bray identifies the asymmetry with characteristic precision: “We can know God’s love by experiencing it, but the depths of our experience can never be adequately defined in words. Something will always be left unarticulated, because there is a dimension to the love of God that cannot be captured in concepts available to our finite minds.”⁷ The inexhaustibility of the divine reality is real. The question is whether that inexhaustibility defeats language or simply contextualizes it. The answer, properly understood, is the latter. And working out why requires engaging the three classical positions on theological predication.

II. The Historical Background: Greek Philosophy and Its Dangers

Before moving to those three positions, it is worth pausing on a piece of intellectual history that tends to get compressed in systematic treatments. Justin Martyr, writing around the middle of the second century, argued that Greek philosophy’s best insights had anticipated the gospel, functioning as a kind of preparatory schooling. Clement of Alexandria, a generation or two later, took up and developed this vision of philosophy

⁶ Bruce Riley Ashford and Keith Whitfield, “Theological Method: An Introduction to the Task of Theology,” in *A Theology for the Church*, rev. ed., ed. Daniel L. Akin (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Academic, 2017), 42 (3–66).

⁷ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 73. Bray’s point is that this inexhaustibility is a theological datum, not an epistemological defect.

as a propaedeutic to faith.⁸ The apologists' willingness to engage Greek conceptual resources was important and often genuinely fruitful. Christianity was not going to retreat from the intellectual culture of the Roman world, and the instinct to engage rather than ignore that culture was sound.

But the engagement carried an inherent risk that the apologists did not always reckon with clearly enough. Philosophical categories inherited from Plato or Aristotle may distort the doctrine of God as readily as they illuminate it. The Arian controversy, which consumed the fourth-century church with an intensity that is difficult to overstate, is the most consequential illustration of that danger. Arius of Alexandria, drawing on certain Middle Platonic assumptions about divine transcendence and the impossibility of direct divine contact with matter, developed a Christology in which the Son was the highest creature—exalted, incomparable, but unmistakably on the creaturely side of the Creator-creature divide. The philosophical framework seemed coherent. The theological conclusions were catastrophic. Nicea in 325 and Constantinople in 381 were not just Christological debates. They were, in part, debates about what happens when philosophical categories drive exegesis rather than serve it.

The three classical positions on theological predication can be read against that backdrop. Each represents a different settlement between Greek metaphysics and biblical revelation, and each carries different risks.

III. Equivocalism: The Refuge of Transcendence

The first position holds that theological predicates are equivocal—from the Latin *aequivocus*, meaning “ambiguous voice.” When we apply a word to God and to a creature, the word means something entirely different in each case. The

⁸ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 10, 13; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 1.5. The image of philosophy as “preparatory schooling” for faith (*propaideia*) is Clement’s characteristic formulation.

tradition has a long pedigree. It runs from Plotinus (207–270) through the medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), whose *Guide for the Perplexed* is the *locus classicus* of a rigorous negative theology.⁹ Maimonides insisted that positive attributes cannot be predicated of God without importing creaturely limitations into the divine nature. The only safe path is negation: God is not ignorant, not limited, not mortal. What God positively is remains beyond human language's reach. Modern figures such as Martin Buber (1878–1964) and Emil Brunner (1889–1966) represent softer versions of the same intuition.¹⁰

The advantage of equivocalism is real. It takes the Creator-creature distinction with radical seriousness. It refuses to domesticate God by forcing Him into the mold of creaturely categories. There is genuine piety in the impulse. The problem is that equivocalism is self-defeating, and not in a trivial way. If “wise” means something wholly other when predicated of God than when predicated of Solomon, then the sentence “God is wise” communicates nothing determinate. It produces the grammatical form of a proposition without the content. Sound familiar? It should. The equivocalist, in the effort to honor divine transcendence, ends up producing theology that is epistemically indistinguishable from Carroll's Jabberwocky. The words are there. The referential content has been evacuated.

Maimonides acknowledged this consequence and treated the apophatic regress as religiously appropriate rather than

⁹ Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.3. Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedlander (London: Routledge, 1904), 1.50–60. Maimonides' argument for the *via negativa* as the only epistemically appropriate path to divine knowledge is developed most rigorously in 1.58.

¹⁰ Martin Buber (1878–1964) and Emil Brunner (1889–1966) both resist positive theological predication, though on different grounds. Buber's I-Thou relational ontology resists objectifying God-talk altogether; Brunner's dialectical theology insists on the total qualitative difference between divine and human categories in a manner that shades toward equivocalism.

epistemically catastrophic. He thought the discipline of recognizing the limits of language was itself a form of reverence. That instinct is not without merit, but it cannot be the final word for anyone committed to the propositional content of Scripture. When the Psalms declare that “the LORD is righteous in all His ways” (Ps. 145:17), that sentence is making a knowledge claim. It is not gesturing toward a transcendent reality that lies permanently beyond the reach of its own words. Negative theology, taken to its full logical conclusion, would make Scripture’s assertions about God systematically uninterpretable. That price is too high.

IV. Univocalism: The Temptation of Clarity

The second position holds that theological predicates are univocal—from the Latin *univocus*, meaning “having one voice.” Words applied to God mean exactly the same thing as when applied to creatures. The most technically precise advocate is the Franciscan philosopher Duns Scotus (1265/6–1308), who argued that the concept of being must be univocal across God and creatures.¹¹ His reasoning was careful: if “being” means something entirely different when said of God, then the conceptual move from creaturely experience to knowledge of God requires a leap across an unbridgeable chasm. Some conceptual bridge is necessary, and for Scotus, univocal predication provides it. William Alston (1921–2009) represents a more modest contemporary version, arguing that certain intentional and dispositional predicates—knowing, willing, acting intentionally—apply univocally to God and human beings, while stopping short of a thoroughgoing univocalism.¹²

¹¹ Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* I, d. 3, p. 1, q. 3. Scotus’s argument for the univocity of being is one of the most technically precise pieces of medieval metaphysics and should be distinguished from cruder forms of univocism.

¹² William Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989). Alston’s partial-univocal position holds that intentional and dispositional

The advantage here is equally real. Univocism delivers clarity. It avoids the obscurantism that can metastasize in equivocalist accounts, and it preserves a genuinely cognitive content for theological language. When you say God knows, you mean something definite.

The problem is that univocism risks collapsing the Creator-creature distinction from the opposite direction. If “wise” means precisely the same thing of God as of Socrates—a discursive, temporally acquired, fallible cognitive excellence, exercised through the accumulation of experience and the correction of prior errors—then divine wisdom has been reduced to a superlative of creaturely wisdom rather than its archetype and cause. God becomes, on this account, the best instance of a type rather than the eternal ground of the type’s existence. Scotus’s careful qualification that the univocal concept of being is logically prior to the distinction between finite and infinite being does not entirely resolve this worry. It relocates it into a different metaphysical register. And the practical danger is significant: a church that habitually thinks about God in univocal terms will eventually domesticate Him. The biblical God—the One whose ways are higher than our ways as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isa. 55:9)—will be quietly replaced by a larger, more powerful version of a human being. That substitution is not merely a philosophical error. It is a form of idolatry.

V. The Via Media: Aquinas and Analogical Predication

Thomas Aquinas’s account of analogical predication offers the classical middle way, and it is the position with which any robustly biblical systematic theology must align.¹³ The *via*

predicates apply univocally across the Creator-creature divide while acknowledging that other divine attributes resist such treatment.

¹³ The locus classicus for Aquinas’s account of analogical predication is *Summa Theologiae* Ia, q. 13 (“The Names of God”), especially aa. 5–6. The three-part movement of affirmation, negation, and eminence (*via affirmationis*, *via negationis*, *via eminentiae*) is implicit in the structure of qq. 3–26 as a whole.

media as it functions here is not a compromise between two equally valid options. It is the recognition that both equivocalism and univocism fail because they operate with an impoverished understanding of the Creator-creature relationship.

When we say that God is wise, Aquinas argues, we mean neither exactly what we mean of a human being (univocal) nor something entirely unrelated (equivocal). We mean that there is in God an analogue to creaturely wisdom: a perfection that is the cause and archetype of creaturely wisdom, possessed by God eminently rather than in the finite, discursive, temporal form in which creatures possess it. The analogy is not merely conceptual, not just a convenient mental shortcut that lets us talk about God while privately acknowledging that nothing we say actually applies. The analogy is grounded in the real causal relationship between God and creation. Because God is the efficient and exemplary cause of creaturely wisdom, the word “wisdom” can genuinely reach Him. It does not reach Him exhaustively, and it does not reach Him without remainder. But it reaches Him truly.

The three-part movement of Aquinas’s analogical method is worth naming explicitly, because it is often compressed or misrepresented in introductory treatments. The first step is affirmation: God is wise. Something real and positive is being said. The second step is negation: not in the creaturely mode. The discursive, temporally conditioned, fallible character of human wisdom is not being attributed to God. The third step is eminence: in a manner infinitely surpassing creaturely wisdom. What is being affirmed is a perfection that exists in God in a mode so elevated above the creaturely instance that our language strains to contain it, but does not fail to touch it. This three-part movement is not skepticism about language. It is precision about the mode of predication. There is a significant difference between saying our words fail to reach God (equivocalism) and saying our words reach God truly but non-exhaustively (analogical realism). The difference is the

difference between a language that can ground genuine theological knowledge and one that cannot.

Kevin Vanhoozer identifies two additional positions beyond the classical three: Alston's partial-univocal approach, and Janet Martin Soskice's metaphorical account.¹⁴ Soskice's position is the weakest of the five available options.¹⁵ A metaphorical account of theological language can preserve the feeling of reference while steadily evacuating its content. Metaphors illuminate; they do not necessarily refer. A theology built primarily on metaphorical predication tends, over time, to become a theology of impressions and atmospheres rather than propositional claims. Scripture does not restrict itself to metaphorical discourse about God. It makes assertions. It claims. It narrates. An adequate account of theological language must explain how those assertions constitute genuine knowledge rather than evocative poetry.

VI. Calvin's *Accommodatio* and the Anthropomorphisms of Scripture

Aquinas's analogical account addresses the philosophical structure of theological predication. Calvin's concept of *accommodatio* addresses a specific and practically pressing exegetical problem: what do we do with Scripture's anthropomorphic language about God? That God repents (Gen. 6:6), that He is angry (Ps. 7:11), that He has hands (Ps.

¹⁴ Kevin Vanhoozer, "Language," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 3rd ed., ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 475. Vanhoozer's discussion of the five positions on theological predication — equivocal, univocal, analogical, partial-univocal (Alston), and metaphorical (Soskice) — provides a useful taxonomy for navigating the options.

¹⁵ Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). Soskice's account is sophisticated and should not be dismissed without engagement, but her central claim that metaphor can bear genuine reference remains contested, and the application of a primarily metaphorical framework to the propositional assertions of Scripture creates difficulties she does not fully resolve.

18:35), eyes (Prov. 15:3), nostrils (Ps. 18:15).¹⁶ The naive reader might take these as literal descriptions of divine anatomy and psychology. The over-sophisticated reader, recoiling from that naivety, might dismiss them as mere decoration, pious hyperbole with no genuine referential content. Both readings are wrong.

Calvin's answer is that Scripture's anthropomorphic language represents a deliberate divine condescension. God, as Calvin famously put it, lisps with us as nurses do with little children.¹⁷ The image is arresting and, once you have encountered it, hard to forget. A mother or nurse does not speak to an infant in the abstract syntax of philosophical discourse. She speaks in simple, concrete, repetitive language calibrated to the child's capacity. This is not a failure of communication. It is communication's highest form: the speaker has taken responsibility for reaching the hearer rather than demanding that the hearer ascend to the speaker's level.

The concept is not original to Calvin, which is itself theologically significant. John Chrysostom, preaching in Antioch and Constantinople in the late fourth century, had already developed the Greek equivalent, *synkatabasis*, as a hermeneutical principle.¹⁸ The patristic roots give the concept a depth that sometimes gets lost in Protestant treatments, where it appears as a distinctively Reformed contribution. It is

¹⁶ The concentration of anthropomorphic language in the Psalter and the narrative portions of the Old Testament makes the question of accommodation inescapable for any serious exegete.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.13.1: "For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont to 'lisp' in speaking to us?" The same principle governs Calvin's exegetical practice throughout the commentaries; see, e.g., his comments on Gen. 3:8 and Exod. 33:23.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*, Homilies 1–5, delivered at Antioch ca. 386. Chrysostom's *synkatabasis* ("condescension") is developed as a positive hermeneutical concept: God's willingness to adapt divine speech to human capacity is itself an expression of divine love, not a concession of epistemic defeat.

not. It is a perennial recognition of how divine condescension and genuine revelation cohere.

The crucial point is what accommodation does not mean. It does not mean that Scripture's language about God is merely figurative, or that the anthropomorphisms fail to refer to real divine properties. It means that God has calibrated His self-disclosure to the cognitive and linguistic capacities of finite, historical human beings. The disclosure is genuine; the form is creaturely. Those two claims are not in tension. They are, in fact, precisely what the doctrine of inspiration requires. A verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture entails that the words are exactly what God intended to communicate. When Scripture says God repents, something real is being communicated about the divine character and the nature of God's covenantal relationship with humanity. The statement is not a literal report of a change in the divine nature (that would contradict the doctrine of divine immutability) but neither is it empty rhetoric. It is accommodation: language calibrated to finite understanding that genuinely refers to a real feature of how God relates to His creatures within history.

VII. Rejecting the Concession: Against the “Degree of Falsehood” Thesis

There is a formulation that circulates in certain Reformed circles that deserves direct and explicit rejection, because it is seductive precisely in proportion to its apparent piety. R. Scott Clark has written that there is always “a certain degree of falsehood in human speech about God.”¹⁹ The motivation behind this remark is the preservation of the Creator-creature distinction, which is a genuinely important theological instinct. The result is a theological concession that cannot be sustained.

¹⁹ R. Scott Clark in *Recovering the Reformed Confession* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 130. The intention—to safeguard the Creator-creature distinction—is understandable; the formulation is, on examination, indefensible for the reasons given in the text.

If every human predication of God carries some degree of falsehood, then Scripture itself carries falsehood. Scripture predicates a very great deal of God in human language. It says He is good, holy, just, merciful, omniscient, omnipotent, faithful, eternal. On Clark's formulation, each of these predications is, to some degree, false. The degree may be small. It may be rounding error. But falsehood, even fractional falsehood, is still falsehood. And a Scripture that is fractionally false about God is not the Scripture of evangelical confession. The Westminster Confession of Faith describes Scripture as "the Word of God written," in which "God himself is the author."²⁰ The God who is the author of Scripture does not introduce falsehood into His own self-communication, however small.

The error in Clark's formulation is a confusion between two very different epistemic categories: exhaustive knowledge and true knowledge. It is certainly the case that human language does not exhaustively or comprehensively circumscribe God. No finite predication contains within itself the full reality of the divine perfection it describes. When we say God is love (1 John 4:8),²¹ we have said something true, something important, something on which a whole theology of redemption can be constructed. We have not said everything that could be said. We have not captured the full depth and texture of the divine love as it exists in the eternal life of the Trinity. That inexhaustibility is real. But inexhaustibility is not falsehood. A map that accurately represents a section of a vast territory is not a false map because it fails to represent the entire territory. It is an accurate map of limited scope. Theological language, on the analogical account, works the same way.

²⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.2: Scripture is "the Word of God written" and carries supreme authority because it is the Word "of which God himself is the author." The corollary is that Scripture's predicates of God are not approximate or partially false but genuinely and reliably true, though not exhaustive.

²¹ The predication here is not metaphorical but ontological: love is not merely an activity of God but a description of what God is.

What we say is genuinely true. It is not exhaustively true. But truth and exhaustiveness are not the same thing, and conflating them produces a false modesty that ends up undermining the very project of theology.

The practical stakes here are not abstract. A congregation that has absorbed, even tacitly, the idea that all speech about God carries some degree of falsehood will approach doctrinal formulation with a kind of low-grade skepticism that gradually erodes conviction. Why press hard for precision in Christology, in the doctrine of the atonement, in the nature of justification, if every formulation is already tainted with inherent inaccuracy? The “degree of falsehood” thesis is not humility. It is the theological equivalent of cutting the legs off the table and then wondering why it keeps falling over.

VIII. Practical Implications: Why This Is Not Just a Philosopher’s Game

Systematic theologians sometimes get accused, with a degree of justice, of spending enormous effort on questions that have no downstream effect on how ordinary Christians live and worship. The doctrine of analogy is not one of those questions. It sits at the foundation of everything. Every sermon, every prayer, every catechetical session, every pastoral conversation about the character of God presupposes an implicit theory of theological language. Most pastors and teachers have never made that theory explicit. They operate on inherited assumptions, and those assumptions range from roughly right to quietly disastrous.

Consider prayer. When a believer prays “Father, You are faithful” (1 Cor. 10:13),²² what is actually happening? Is the believer addressing a reality that their words genuinely reach, or are they performing a kind of religiously useful self-talk

²² The assertion carries the force of a settled ontological statement: God’s faithfulness is not a disposition He might or might not exercise but a property He cannot not possess.

whose content points vaguely toward something beyond language? The equivocalist has to say the latter, whether or not he uses those words. The analogical realist can say the former with full theoretical backing. Prayer is not a linguistic performance in the direction of the ineffable. It is conversation with the God who made human language precisely so that finite creatures could address Him, and who has accommodated Himself to that language in Scripture so that the address would be received.

Consider also doctrinal controversy. The history of Christian theology is, in large part, the history of arguments about predication. The Arian controversy, as noted earlier, was partly an argument about what “begotten” means when applied to the eternal Son. The Nestorian and Monophysite controversies were arguments about how human and divine predicates could be applied to a single subject. The Protestant-Catholic debates over justification are arguments about what “righteous” means when predicated of a sinner before God. None of these debates can be properly conducted without some account of how theological language works. The analogical account provides the tools needed to make the relevant distinctions with precision.

There is also the matter of worship. The church that takes analogical predication seriously will be a church that holds together two things that popular Christianity has a persistent tendency to separate: genuine knowledge of God and genuine reverence before Him. Cheap familiarity with God—the therapeutic, low-stakes deity of much contemporary evangelicalism—is in part a product of latent univocism. God has become, in the imagination of many churchgoers, essentially a powerful and benevolent human being. The awe that Scripture consistently associates with the presence of God has leaked away. On the other side, the paralyzing mysticism that sometimes masquerades as Reformed piety—the endless retreat into “God is incomprehensible” as a reason to avoid theological precision—is in part a product of latent

equivocalism. Analogical realism holds the two together: genuine knowledge, genuine reverence. Not false familiarity. Not speechless agnosticism. Truthful speech before a God who infinitely exceeds what any single formulation can contain but who has made Himself genuinely known in Scripture and supremely in His Son.

Conclusion: More Can Always Be Said; What Has Been Said Is True

The positivist challenge to theological language was never as devastating as its proponents believed, but it was clarifying. It forced theologians and philosophers of religion to be much more careful about the mechanics of religious discourse, and the result has been a significantly richer engagement with the classical doctrine of analogy than the nineteenth-century church typically managed. What Ayer and Carnap inadvertently did, by pressing the question of meaning with such remorseless sharpness, was demand that theologians actually defend what they had been assuming. The analogical account is that defense.

The position can be stated cleanly. Theological language genuinely refers to God. Theological propositions are genuine knowledge claims; they are not performances, not symbols pointing beyond themselves into permanent opacity, not approximations tainted by irreducible falsehood. The humility appropriate to doctrinal formulation does not reflect the failure of language to reach God. It reflects the inexhaustibility of the God whom language reaches. When Calvin called Scripture God's lisping accommodation to human capacity, he was not lowering the epistemic stakes of revelation. He was insisting, with full force, that the accommodation works—that the lisp is genuine speech, that the condescension is genuine disclosure, that the finite form carries infinite truth without ceasing to be finite.

The practical requirement that follows from all of this is that theological conclusions should be stated at the level the evidence warrants—not inflated beyond what the exegesis supports, not deflated by a false modesty that mistakes inexhaustibility for silence. More can always be said. There are always further dimensions of the divine perfections to explore, further implications of the biblical text to draw out, further doctrinal connections to trace. That is what makes theology an endlessly living discipline rather than a closed system.

But what has been said can be said truly. The slithy *toves gyre* and *gimble* and mean nothing. “The LORD is righteous in all His ways and kind in all His works” (Ps. 145:17) means something clear, definite, and true. The difference between those two sentences is not just grammatical. It is the difference between noise and knowledge. Theological language, properly grounded in the doctrine of analogy and rightly understood in light of divine accommodation, belongs on the second side of that distinction. Firmly, permanently, and without apology.

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