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BOOK REVIEW

Archie J. Spencer. *The Analogy of Faith: The Quest for God's Speakability*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015. iv + 441 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-830-84068-7. \$40.00.

The contemporary debate on analogy lies at the heart of theological enterprise: how can finite human beings say anything meaningful about God? Archie Spencer, associate professor of theology and John H. Pickford Chair of Systematic Theology at Northwest Baptist Seminary, argues that, early in its development, Christian theology adopted a system of metaphysics based on Greek thought that resulted in an *analogia entis*, an analogy between God as “being” and human contingent beings that attempted to avoid the pitfalls of univocity (words applying to human beings mean exactly the same thing when applied to God) and equivocity (human language cannot say anything meaningful about God in a constructive sense). According to Spencer, this type of analogy cannot achieve its goal and tends to lapse into the very pitfalls it attempts to avoid. Against this option, Spencer, drawing on Karl Barth and Eberhard Jüngel, argues for an *analogia fidei*, an analogy firmly rooted in Jesus Christ as the intermediary between God and humanity. He then elaborates on the ways in which Christ as the Word grounds the *analogia fidei*.

Spencer begins by locating the origin of “the problem of speaking about God, in a way that counted as knowledge of God” (31) in Western thought (with the Greeks), especially in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists. The Greeks answered this problem by appealing to cause-effect-resemblance (CER) between God (the Prime Mover in Aristotle or the One in Neoplatonism) and his creation. Augustine created a synthesis between Neoplatonism and Christianity, explicating a doctrine of *vestigia trinitatis* that relies upon CER.

This approach to analogy passed on into the thought of Thomas Aquinas. In addition to drawing upon Aristotle, Aquinas also draws upon Neoplatonic thought, also relying on CER, in his writings on analogy. Spencer makes the case that “Aquinas contributed a confused method of analogy that left the Catholic tradition open to multiple interpretations of the Thomistic principle, both in terms of philosophical and theological interpretations” (91). Defending Cajetan’s much maligned interpretation of analogy in Aquinas, Spencer counters that, since Cajetan “is authoritative in all other respects of Aquinas’s theology, especially his metaphysics,” it seems odd that he “is to be rejected, or heavily corrected, in this one crucial matter” (151). For Spencer, in spite of later critics, such as Hans Urs von Balthazar and Erich Przywara, “Cajetan represents the mainstream of Catholic thought on analogy” (174). Spencer’s presentation and analysis of Aquinas and Cajetan are thorough and convincing, but he gives short shrift to the views of Balthazar and Przywara. The reader searching for a balanced perspective will have to investigate the other side for themselves.

In his third chapter, Spencer begins the constructive part of his work, beginning with Karl Barth. Barth is opposed to any knowledge of God rooted in any place other than the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Even being created in the image of God does not mean that there is an intrinsic resemblance between humanity and God, but rather simply means that humanity bears witness to the existence of God. The *analogia entis*, based as it is on a CER between God and creation, is in Barth’s view an attempt to ground knowledge of God outside of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ as witnessed to in Scripture. Barth’s rejection of *analogia entis* fits naturally with his rejection of natural theology.

In place of this analogy, Barth posits an *analogia fidei*, which is rooted in God’s decision to become a human being. It is God’s decision to reveal himself, rather than anything intrinsic to humanity (which would threaten the absolute difference between God and humanity), that makes speaking about God possible. Spencer’s reading of Barth, while admirably lucid, does not make a clear case for taking Barth’s perspective over its

alternative. For instance, if one disagrees with Barth's rejection of natural theology, one might also call into question his rejection of *analogia entis*.

Spencer then moves to Eberhard Jüngel, an authority on Barth who has attempted to explicate Barth's thought and to work out its implications. Jüngel's "analogy of advent" furthers Barth's understanding of an *analogia fidei* by describing the advent as a "Word-event" that "requires a radically revised theism" (245). As opposed to Barth's emphasis on maintaining a radical distinction between God and humanity, "Jüngel wants to reinterpret the *analogia fidei* in the terms of a more linguistically and hermeneutically grounded modality of the speakability of God as an identity with humanity" (247).

Jüngel also takes Aquinas's analogical method to task, arguing that it combines the analogy of attribution (where one thing is properly named and others have the same name in a derivative sense) with the analogy of proportionality (a:b::c:d), as well as arguing that it allows one to speak about God only as an unknown entity. What Spencer neglects to point out is that Jesus uses precisely this type of analogy in Matt 7:9–11 and Luke 11:11–13.

In Jesus' analogy, "father" applies properly to God and secondarily to human fathers (cf. Matt 23:9), and his comparison of the relationship between God and his people and human fathers and their sons is a proportional analogy. Granted, one only knows the Father through the Son, and this relationship is prior to Jesus' analogy, but this analogy still stands in tension with Spencer's reading of Jüngel's critique of the Thomist tradition. More troubling is Jüngel's idea that "the historical death of God in Jesus Christ" is somehow necessary to avoid "the metaphysical distancing of God" (280) that otherwise precludes God's speakability. It is hard to resist the conclusion that, for Jüngel (and Spencer), human finitude is itself as problematic as sin.

In his fifth and final chapter, Spencer puts forth his own proposal to expand on the work of Barth and Jüngel. To Jüngel's analogy of advent expressed in parable, he adds "the coming of God in his Word as participation and performance" (290).

Spencer grounds this analogy in John 1, moving carefully from exegesis to theology. He also reiterates the incompatibility of *analogia fidei* with *analogia entis* on the grounds that an *analogia entis* is not grounded in the revelatory event of the incarnation. In his reading of Barth, the Trinity itself becomes the other side of the coin of God's election of humanity, making the incarnation the necessary and sole ground of any meaningful talk about God.

Spencer's work stands squarely and unapologetically in the Barthian tradition. Unfortunately, beyond an early and passing reference to Augustine's use of Rom 1:18–20, he does not see the need to wrestle with biblical references of creation's testimony to God and God's nature.

Furthermore, he provides no satisfactory account of God's self-revelation prior to the incarnation. Moses' witness to God was indeed inferior in comparison to Christ's witness, but Spencer's acknowledgement that "Moses is in some sense authorized to speak on God's behalf" (370) undermines his attempts to make the incarnation the sole analogical vehicle for speaking meaningfully about God. However "incomprehensible" God may have been prior to the incarnation, he still successfully revealed meaningful aspects of himself to his people.

Finally, his generalization of a Protestant suspicion toward the *analogia entis* does not take into account Alister McGrath's approach to analogy and natural theology. The classical conception of analogy may indeed be as problematic as Spencer depicts it to be, but Scripture itself seems to imply some sort of CER that can hardly be ignored. On the one hand, Spencer, along with Barth, is right to reject any notion of an analogy independent from God's revelation, but he does not consider McGrath's approach of grounding natural theology on Christian presuppositions. On the other hand, Spencer's close reading of his sources and careful argumentation demand a careful reading by those who side with Balthazar and Przywara in their interpretation of Aquinas on analogy, and proponents of radical orthodoxy in their retrieval of certain aspects of Neoplatonism. The concerns he raises cannot be lightly set aside.

Spencer has written a substantive work that will hopefully

provoke further dialogue on this subject. His opponents will have to come to terms with his thorough presentation of the historical and theological problems of the *analogia entis*. Spencer makes it clear that the question of analogy has deep ramifications for justifying the possibility of theology in the postmodern era. The length, scope, and complexity of the argument may prove daunting for the non-specialist, but the importance of this work ought not to be underestimated.

Bradley K. Broadhead
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON