



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Wisdom Transformed by Love
(Where Wisdom Is Found,
pp. 38-45)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Wisdom Transformed by Love

In his rich treatment of the virtue of wisdom, Thomas Aquinas insists that not only must wisdom be transformed by love, but also love must be transformed by wisdom. Thus the contemplative life overflows into a life of self-giving love and service.

Prayer

God of vision, wisdom, love and mercy, we hear your attributes proclaimed. We sing your praise. We bow beneath your majesty.

You have taught us that by respecting and responding to who you are, we find the wise way. Teach us how to build upon that firm foundation, not the manipulating wisdom that achieves our own will, but the palace of wisdom that celebrates your work and will in this world. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 8:1-13, 22-31

Reflection

Wisdom's allure in Proverbs 8 is that her call for everyone to embrace what is true, good, and just, is embedded in the very fabric of the orderly universe God has fashioned. The wisdom we need for a well-ordered practical life, she reminds us, is entwined with our rightly understanding the Creator and creation.

On this point we have much to learn from Israel's sages, for too often we have allowed the two facets of wisdom—the theoretical or contemplative life and the practical or active life—to drift apart. We have caricatured the options before us as having faith or works, as being just a head-in-the-clouds theologian or a social-gospel campaigner, an arid academic or a naïve activist.

How can we recover a full-orbed perspective on wisdom? Tom Hibbs suggests that we study the account of this virtue by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas believed the pursuit of wisdom is "more perfect, more noble, more useful, and more full of joy" than all other human pursuits, for by it, we attain a "portion of true beatitude" and approach to the "likeness of God."

Aquinas was a member of the newly formed Dominican religious order, which urged a return to the gospel and recovery of early church life. "The Dominican vision of the Christian life is one in which an initial longing for, and love of, God is deepened and informed by assiduous study and prayer," Hibbs notes. "Aquinas believed our love for God and desire to serve God are manifested in the pursuit of wisdom, both contemplative and practical." Therefore, he taught that wisdom

- ▶ *begins and ends in wonder.* With the ancient philosopher Aristotle, Aquinas agrees that our desire to know springs from our sense of our own ignorance; we want to understand connections among things, to grasp their fundamental causes. This sense of wonder, or desire to "put it all together," ultimately leads us to God. Also, wisdom leads to another kind of wonder that acknowledges the limits of our knowing.

For Aquinas, the great delight and beauty of theoretical wisdom—the contemplation of God—has this ecstatic character: "our abilities to understand what is good...are, in their encounter with beauty, enlarged in the sense that we are increasingly aware



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of being in the presence of what is really good,” Hibbs observes. We are so transfixed that we forget ourselves and lose a sense of time. “Wisdom is hardly a self-regarding virtue; much less is it a calculative skill or an activity of the intellect utterly isolated from affection or love.”

- ▶ *begins in God's gift.* Aquinas transformed the ancient ideal of wisdom with this idea from Scripture: “God, who is the creator of all that exists, descends to us in wisdom and love in order to raise us to him in friendship.” Our love for God in return is not formed by “the repetition of certain kinds of acts (which is how we attain natural moral virtues); instead, its original and abiding source is divine grace, a wholly unmerited gift.” Wisdom begins with an encounter with God.
- ▶ *leads to faithful action.* “The active life in which, by preaching and teaching, one hands on to others the things contemplated is superior to the life that is devoted exclusively to contemplation because the former presupposes an abundance of contemplation,” Aquinas concludes, for “Christ chose such a life.” For Aquinas, contemplation results not only in “a greater appreciation of divine beauty,” but also “an impulse to be a vehicle of that beauty’s presence in the world,” Hibbs writes. “In Christ, we see the beauty of the divine life and our desire to participate in that life is inflamed.”

Study Questions

1. In his rich treatment of wisdom, which ideas did Thomas Aquinas borrow from the ancient pagan philosophical tradition? How did he transform these ideas in light of Scripture?
2. For Aquinas, what role does beauty play in the contemplative life and active life? How does beauty integrate the two?
3. Which form of a wise life—the contemplative or active—appeals to you? Why? How might Aquinas urge you to appreciate and integrate the other facet of wisdom in your life?
4. Discuss the significance of Aquinas’ view that we encounter God and divine beauty primarily through acts of worship, for worship is God’s way of meeting us where we live in order to raise us to him.

Departing Hymn: “God Is Love; His Mercy Brightens” (vv. 1, 2, and 3)

God is love; his mercy brightens
all the path in which we rove;
bliss he wakes, and woe he lightens:
God is wisdom, God is love.

Chance and change are busy ever;
man decays and ages move;
but his mercy waneth never:
God is wisdom, God is love.

E’en the hour that darkest seemeth
will his changeless goodness prove;
from the mist his brightness streameth:
God is wisdom, God is love.

John Bowring (1825)
Tune: SUSSEX

Wisdom Transformed by Love

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the tension between a contemplative life and an active life.
2. To introduce Thomas Aquinas's full-orbed view of wisdom as theoretical/contemplative and practical/active.
3. To consider how our encounter with God's beauty leads to the integration of the contemplative and active dimensions of wisdom.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Where Wisdom is Found (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God is Love; His Mercy Brightens" locate the familiar tune SUSSEX in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with an Observation

"Words are polluted," the novelist Walker Percy (1916-1990) warned. "Who is going to protect words like 'love,' guard against their devaluation?" Percy's judgment and challenge is issued to our modern world which has coarsened the language of virtue and vice.

Tom Hibbs takes on the challenge of guarding against the devaluation of wisdom, a central virtue in the Christian life. "The problem may be less severe with the language of wisdom if only because it is protected from abuse by disuse," he notes. "While we inevitably use terms such as 'courageous,' 'hopeful,' and 'generous,' we almost never employ 'wise.' The closest we come to 'wisdom' is in our terms 'prudent,' or 'learned,' or 'smart.' These terms themselves, none of which is equivalent to 'wisdom,' have been debased and in many cases transformed into what the ancients would have called vices rather than virtues. Contrary to our modern understanding of it, wisdom involves more than mere accumulation of information; it is more than mere problem-solving ability. It is not just cleverness. T. S. Eliot wonders at the loss of this virtue in the modern world, 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'"

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer printed in the study guide in unison.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Proverbs 8:1-13 and 8:22-31 from a modern translation.

Reflection

The rich treatment of wisdom by Thomas Aquinas may not be easy to understand and explain, but it is certainly worth the effort. He understands the two conflicting desires that we all have for a life focused on study, reflection, and greater understanding of ourselves and the world we care about, and a life devoted to active, loving service of other people and care for the creation. We may be tempted to choose one form of life and denigrate those who choose the other, but Aquinas teaches us to hold the two ways of life together in creative tension. That is how Christ, whom he calls “begotten wisdom,” lived.

Study Questions

1. The idea that wisdom begins and ends in wonder is part of the ancient philosophical legacy. Aquinas draws the idea from Aristotle (384-322 bc), who in his *Metaphysics* argued that our desire to know the ultimate causes of motion in the universe leads us to believe in an unmoved mover, who moves all things as an object of desire. “Thus, the hunger to behold the ultimate cause of reality, even to be transformed into that cause, is part of the philosophical tradition, as much as it is part of the Christian heritage,” Tom Hibbs writes.

Aquinas transforms this view with the biblical idea “that God, who is the creator of all that exists, descends to us in wisdom and love in order to raise us to him in friendship.” God infuses us with faith and responsive love. God manifests his wisdom in creation and through the perfect human life of Christ, whom Aquinas calls “wisdom incarnate.”

2. The ancients debated which sort of life, contemplative or active, would give one the most and highest pleasure. They thought of the “contemplative life” as filled with intellectual *activity*, with the enjoyment of the truth and beauty before one. (Think of a grandparent enjoying a grandchild – not changing diapers or correcting behavior, but fully dwelling in the child’s presence.) The “active life” included the projects of caring for oneself and others, of building and maintaining community. Would we take pleasure in accomplishing these goals of caring and community building if they were no longer necessary, if all that is complete and good was given for us to enjoy?

Given that we *must* care now for ourselves, for others, and for the creation, how should we balance contemplation and practical action?

3. Contemplation is so delightful for us, Aquinas believes, precisely because it is an encounter with beauty that stretches and improves our human capacities. Hibbs summarizes: “our abilities to *understand* what is good...are, in their encounter with beauty, enlarged in the sense that we are increasingly aware of being in the presence of what is really good. Our *desires* for the good...are so taken up into the object of beauty that they can be said to ‘hand themselves over’ to the object of their delight so as to remain in the object.” Beauty is also at the heart of the active life. When we lovingly care for ourselves, for others, and for the creation, we participate in, we image, God’s beauty. “The life in which contemplation overflows into action is an imitation of the divine activity, wherein God, both in his original act of creation and even more marvelously in his redemptive descent, communicates his wisdom, goodness, and beauty to creatures.”
4. Hibbs summarizes Aquinas’s view: “In our present life we cannot literally see God and gaze on divine truth directly. Thus, through revelation about appropriate ways of worshipping God, divine things are ‘expressed in words’ and ‘proffered to the senses’ (ST, I-II, 99, 3, ad 3). The practice of giving back to God fitting praise and gratitude allows the ‘ray of divine light to shine on us under the form of certain sensible figures’ (ST, I-II, 101, 2).”

How would Aquinas’s view of worship – as worship being God’s gift of friendship, coming to us in a way that accommodates himself to our human condition – change the way we value a worship service? In your personal and corporate worship, what elements of beauty intimate the divine beauty that draws us out of ourselves and makes us aware of God’s presence? Consider the architecture of the worship space, the use of images and symbols, the presence of nature (through broad windows), the use of music and silence, opportunities to share testimonies, the physical presence of other worshipers, and so on. Does everything in the service have to be “perfect” and go according to plan in order for it to be beautiful in the way Aquinas describes?

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.