

God Is a Stronghold

Martin Luther (1483–1546); tr. Dame Elizabeth Wordsworth (1840–1932)

God is a Stronghold and a Tower,
A Help that never faileth,
A covering Shield, a Sword of power,
When Satan's host assaileth.
In vain our crafty foe
Still strives to work us woe,
Still lurks and lies in wait
With more than earthly hate;
We will not faint, nor tremble.

Frail sinners are we: naught remains
For hope or consolation,
Save in His strength whom God ordains
Our Captain of salvation.
Yes, Jesus Christ alone
The Lord of hosts we own,
God ere the world began,
The Word-made-flesh for man,
Still conquering, and to conquer.

Though fiercely strive the hosts of ill
Within us, and around us,
With fiendish strength, and fiendish skill,
Yet ne'er may they confound us.
Man's night of dark despair,
When storm clouds fill the air,
In God's triumphal hour,
The noonday of His power,
One word, and He prevaieth.

Our Father's truth abideth sure;
Christ, our Redeemer, liveth;
For us He pleads His offering pure,
To us His Spirit giveth.
Though dear ones pass away,
Though strength and life decay,
Yet loss shall be our gain,
For God doth still remain
Our All-in-all forever.



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In the Nick of Time

Knowledge and Analogy

Kevin T. Bauder

Some theologians grow concerned about the use of analogical language. They think that all our statements about God must be meant literally. By *literally* they mean that words we use of God must mean exactly what they mean when we use those words of ourselves. They fear that by admitting any element of analogy, we shall begin to slide down the slope toward meaningless language.

The Bible takes exactly the opposite perspective. The Scriptures seize analogy as one of the two most important ways of coming to know God. The other way is story—but that is a topic for a different discussion. For now, we need to consider the way in which God's Word uses analogies to help us grasp the person and character of God and the nature of holy things. The Bible regularly employs metaphor and simile in their various permutations to give us glimpses of God's person and works.

Metaphors and similes are analogies. Similes are indirect analogies: *this is like that*. Metaphors are direct analogies: *this is that*, *has that*, or *does that*. Many other tropes, such as merism, metonymy, and synecdoche, are just specialized forms of metaphors.

Consider one of the best-known analogies in Scripture: "The Lord is my shepherd." This statement about God is certainly not literal. It is an image, a word picture. But it is not less important for that. It tells us something meaningful about God—at least, it does if we understand what a shepherd is and what a shepherd does. It also tells us something meaningful about ourselves. If the Lord is our shepherd, then we are like sheep. When we understand the metaphor, we gain knowledge of God. We also gain knowledge of ourselves.

This observation raises an important possibility. As we have already seen, the language we use of God is analogical. We know God through analogies. But what if we also know ourselves and our world through analogies? Analogues that help us to grasp holy things also help us to grasp where we stand in relation to those things.

Scripture helps us to know God through many analogies. The pages of Scripture picture the Lord not only as a shepherd, but also as a rock, a tower, a fortress, a commander, a man of war, a jilted husband, a great king, a father, a dwelling place or home, a legislator, a judge, an inheritance, a teacher, a planter of a vineyard, a farmer of a field, a consuming fire, a shelter, a rider on the storm, a sun and shield, a banner, a hunter who snares his prey, a singer, a crown of glory and beauty, a sleeper about to rise up, and a potter who fashions a vessel. The list could be continued. Each of these analogies says something not only about who God is, but about who we are in relation to Him.

So also it is with Christ. He is pictured as a door, a road, a mother hen, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the lamb of God, the branch, the true vine, the good shepherd, the bread of life, the light of the world, the root of David, the bright and morning star, and the bridegroom. Each of these analogies discloses something about who Christ is in Himself. Some of them have a further lesson about who Christ is in relation to the Father. Others of them tell us who Christ is in relation to His people—which means that they tell us something about who and what we are as His people.

This double direction of biblical analogy becomes especially clear in the images that Scripture uses for salvation. Justification is set in the courtroom: God is the judge and we are the guilty parties. Regeneration takes us into the birthing chamber, where God is our Father and we are given life as we are born into His family as His children. Imputation takes us into the accountant's office, where God reckons guilt or righteousness to us and to Christ. Redemption locates us in the slave market, where God buys us out of the market and sets us free. Forgiveness is viewed as a bath in which God washes us from moral pollution. Reconciliation sees us as aggressors in a war against God, but it is a war in which God has done everything necessary to secure peace. Each of these analogies reveals something about God, but it also reveals something about us.

Some analogies are explicitly about us. The Church is envisioned as a flock (but not a fold). It is seen as a new race, as a holy temple, as the body of Christ, as a selected nation, as a priesthood, as a field, as a bride. Christian leaders are depicted as fishermen, farmers, builders, old men, shepherds, managers, and nursing mothers. We ourselves are pictured as freed slaves, purchased possessions, pardoned criminals, born children, adopted heirs, new creations, sheep of His pasture, temples of His Spirit, parts of Christ's body, soldiers, servants, branches on a vine.

We could not know God rightly without analogies. We could not know Christ rightly without analogies. We could not know the Church rightly without analogies. We could not even know ourselves rightly without analogies. At this point, we might begin to suspect that much and perhaps all our knowledge is analogical in nature.

This use of analogies does pose some questions. How can we be sure that the analogies really work? How can we protect ourselves from wrong inferences drawn from analogies? After all, analogies never correspond at every point—otherwise they would be bare literalisms. Perhaps these questions might be worth returning to at some future time.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
