

WONDER AND WISDOM AS THEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

by

Cherie Michels
SID 400488780

November 12, 2023

Introduction

Wonder and wisdom are words that are easy to say in passing but difficult to live out or experience in their true fullness. We frequently use words like wonderful and wise in casual conversation, but if we really examined what wonder and wisdom meant, we may not use them so flippantly.

To view wonder and wisdom as a practice of our faith takes these ideas beyond flippant words used in passing conversation. Although wisdom and wonder are not considered faith practices in any formality, perhaps they should be. According to Dorothy Bass, practices are activities which address practical needs within communities of people.¹ They can be practiced alone or in a community, but ultimately benefit more than just oneself. Practicing wonder and wisdom begins in solitude, but once outwardly practiced, it allows one to recognize and live into the importance of human interconnectedness. A practice of wonder can humbly remind you of your smallness in the enormity of the world and, at the same time, help you feel grateful for how important you are within your circle of friends and family. It can do this because wonder is not simply being amazed about something. Similarly, practicing wisdom can humble the academic, reminding them of all the things they do not know while at the same time encouraging those who feel uneducated by reminding them of all the practical things they do know. This is possible because wisdom is not just knowing something. When an individual practices wonder and wisdom as regular, intentional practices of their faith, they become more able to help, support, celebrate and value those in the community with them. God calls his followers to love God and their neighbour, and they can do both with these practices.

¹ Bass and Copeland, eds., *Practicing Our Faith*, 6–7.

Defining Wonder

*Who is like you among the gods, O Lord— glorious in holiness,
awesome in splendour, performing great wonders?*

Exodus 15:11, NLT

Wonder, by definition, is “a feeling of surprise mingled with admiration, caused by something beautiful, unexpected, unfamiliar or inexplicable.”² However, in English, the words *awe* and *wonder* are often used interchangeably. Both words describe a feeling, but the feeling and its cause come from different sources. Where wonder causes surprise or admiration, awe causes reverence and fear. Where wonder is caused by beauty or the unexpected, awe is caused by something powerful or sublime. When we see the majesty of a mountain or the delicacy of a butterfly, we may be amazed and curious—this is the feeling of wonder. However, if we watch a severe thunderstorm pass outside our window, we may feel frightened and humbled—this is the feeling of awe. Wonder, mixed with amazement and often a sense of threat, creates a feeling of awe.³

Wonder as a Theological Practice

Wonder is not included as a formal, documented theological practice. However, this does not mean the church cannot develop a theological practice of wonder. To consider how to practice wonder, it will be explored as a psychological practice and integrated through scripture and other known faith practices.

² *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Wonder.”

³ Stellar et al., “Awe and Humility.,” 259.

Through Bass, we understand that a practice is something done in a community. Wonder is something that is often considered a personal experience. However, the author Vlad P. Glăveanu explores wonder as a collective experience, and this is the perspective that will be investigated for wonder as a theological practice. Glăveanu believes that we seldom wonder alone, especially in communities of common interest. This is because we need something or someone to wonder *about*, and we need alternate perspectives to consider if our thoughts are correct or thoroughly flushed out. This collaborative wonder allows us to participate in and open ourselves up to the experience of others,⁴ giving us the opportunity to practice vulnerability⁵ and allowing us to develop compassion for those we may not otherwise connect with. Wondering in community invites us to view experiences from another person’s perspective,⁶ which could increase our compassion for those different from ourselves.

Galatians 6:2 says, “Share each other’s burdens, and in this way obey the law of Christ.” Using wonder, we can open ourselves up to others, allow others to open up to us, and view their experience from a perspective we may not otherwise have considered. In this way, wonder brings a community of faith together to support, love and honour each other the way Christ has commanded us to.

Another way we can practice wonder is by using it as the first step toward wisdom. John O’Donohue said, “When you look around and see people, landscapes, oceans, stars, birds, stones, flowers—none of them are here by accident, but each of them was born within the mind of God.”⁷ When we go outside of our own understanding and enter curiously into other aspects of

⁴ Glăveanu, *Wonder*, 147–48.

⁵ Bass and Copeland, eds., *Practicing Our Faith*, 15–16.

⁶ Glăveanu, *Wonder*, 118.

⁷ O’Donohue and Quinn, *Walking in Wonder*, 33.

God's creation, we take the first step into practicing wisdom, and it is this practice that will be explored next.

Defining Wisdom

For the LORD grants wisdom! From his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

Proverbs 2:6

Wisdom is defined as “The quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgement; the quality of being wise.”⁸ As the above quote from Proverbs says, wisdom is not just intellectual knowledge of something. Wisdom combines knowledge (intellectual knowledge) and understanding (practical knowledge). Social activist and lawyer Charles Halpern has a beautiful perspective on what wisdom is. He sees wisdom as a way of *being*—grounded, reflective, insightful, and compassionate—while working through our external work in the world.⁹ Too often, like in the case of wonder and awe, we use the words wisdom, knowledge and understanding interchangeably—and incorrectly.

For example, someone may have *knowledge* of the verse in Matthew 6:14, which says, “If you forgive those who sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you.” However, wisdom takes that intellectual knowledge, puts it into practice and does the hard work of forgiving someone who has hurt you. Until something moves out of our thoughts and into our actions, it is just knowledge; it is not wisdom. Knowing this, we can now recognize that wonder is the beginning of knowledge, and knowledge is the beginning of wisdom. “Fear of the LORD is the foundation of true knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.” (Prov 1:7)

⁸*Oxford English Dictionary*, “Wisdom.”

⁹ Halpern, *Making Waves and Riding the Currents*, 2–3.

Wisdom as a Theological Practice

Like wonder, wisdom is not a formally recognized theological practice. Although wisdom is often read of in the scriptures, it is seldom discussed as an attainable, learnable skill one can actively seek. Often, the Bible speaks of wisdom as God-granted (Ex 23:3, 1 Chron 22:12, Isa 28:29), as possessed by the elderly or well-respected (Deut 1:13, Job 12:12), and as the wisdom of God (Ps 104:24, 1 Cor 1:24). However, to look at wisdom as a practice, we will focus on actively *asking* God for wisdom (2 Chron 1:7-12).

William P Brown writes that “Wisdom begins and ends with the self in recognition that knowledge of God is inseparably entwined with knowledge of the self.”¹⁰ Many times in the Bible, we read that human wisdom is nothing compared to the wisdom of God. Without acknowledging that we are incapable of gaining wisdom alone, the only thing we will gain is knowledge. Therefore, as humans, to practice wisdom, we must recognize that our self and God are inseparable and that wisdom is something we need to seek *with* God. We need to begin by asking God for wisdom. This may sound forward or arrogant, but King Solomon, one of the wisest men in the Bible, was rewarded by God because he asked for wisdom (2 Chron 1:7-11). God offered Solomon anything he wanted, and Solomon recognized that to reign over the people God had entrusted to him, the most important thing God could give him was wisdom. In this action, Solomon acknowledged that he had real-life, “worldly” duties as king, but to attend to those duties, he needed to be sure that he had inner wisdom to be successful in his kingship and faithful to his belief in God.

Some of the habits required to practice wisdom discussed by Halpern, although not from a Christian perspective, are highly applicable to a Christian practice of wisdom.

¹⁰ Brown, *Wisdom's Wonder*, 4.

Practicing wisdom involves *aligning work* (external) *with values* (internal), it demands a commitment to *keeping life in balance*, and it requires *time for reflection*.¹¹ By combining these practical elements with actively seeking God in wisdom, the church can become a place where wisdom is used and shared. Wisdom is not just what we know but how, through God, we can faithfully live out that knowledge for the benefit of all people.

Beginning with wonder, we become more open to the lives, situations, and perspectives of those around us. By opening ourselves up to things outside our experience, we ask questions and are more able to lovingly enter into community with others. As we gain knowledge about other's experiences, we can learn how to walk alongside them in compassion and love. When we ask God to help us gain wisdom, we will learn to discern how we can help others walk through their pain or celebrate their joys.

There is one other practice we need to introduce for this to work: humility. We will explore this practice next.

The Required Element of Humility

Fear of the Lord teaches wisdom; humility precedes honour.

Proverbs 15:33 NLT

Many books and articles speak about another element when they discuss the topics of wonder and wisdom. That element is *humility*. Humility is defined as “Freedom from pride or arrogance.”¹² Humility fits with wonder and wisdom in a cyclical relationship that

¹¹ Halpern, *Making Waves and Riding the Currents*, 6.

¹² *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Humility.”

works, as illustrated in Figure 1. What this illustration does not tell us is that the addition of humility makes both wonder and wisdom (whether practiced together or individually) into Christian practices.

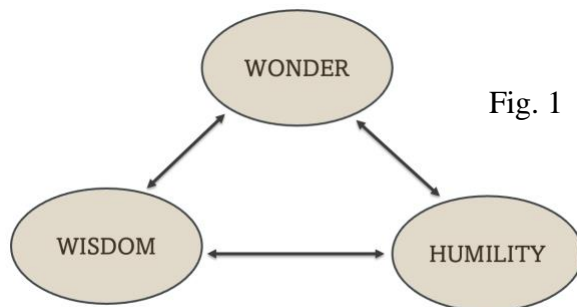


Fig. 1

Those who are not Christian can practice wisdom and wonder—this has been explored in this essay, as much of the information has been based on psychological, not faith-based practice. Without humility, wisdom and wonder can be practiced for the sole benefit of the one practicing. When we practice wisdom for ourselves, we seek the fame, power and notoriety that comes from being wise. When we practice wonder for ourselves, we do so as “self-help” for psychological or emotional purposes. This is not to say that those who practice these things for these reasons are wrong, but if we want to focus on wonder and wisdom as a theological practice, humility is a required “sister” practice.

Although humility is not a Christian term, it may be surprising to learn that there is a significant difference between the definition of secular humility and Christian humility. Where secular culture recognizes humility as a *moral value* that expresses itself as modesty or as having a low opinion of oneself, Christian humility is seen as a *religious virtue*, recognized as an opposition to pride and recognition that one’s gifts are from God and not of one’s own making.¹³

How humility fits into practices of wisdom and wonder is through the heart of each practitioner. For someone to theologically practice wonder or wisdom, they need to

¹³ Kellenberger, “Humility,” 321, 328.

acknowledge that there are things in this world that they do not understand. They need to recognize their smallness and God's vastness. King Solomon knelt in front of the entirety of Israel and prayed, interceding for the people of Israel, asking God to hear his prayers (2 Chron 6:12-42). In this prayer, he calls himself and his father, King David, servants of God (2 Chron 6:17, 19, 42). This role reversal of "king-to-servant" is precisely how Jesus presents himself to humanity, and it is how we need to recognize ourselves before God, regardless of how elevated we are in our earthly positions.

Proverbs 9:10 tells us the "Fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom. With this in mind, we should look to Solomon as an example of someone who practiced wisdom, wonder and humility in unison and was richly rewarded by God.

Conclusion

The practices of wonder, wisdom and humility are not unique to Christianity, but when practiced together, they are a beautiful way to bring honour to God in how we live our lives in our communities. Too often, theology can feel like something we do as individuals—learning, memorizing, confessing—but theological practices bring our personal disciplines into action and they are the way we can practically show the love of God to others.

Through the practice of wonder, we can consider the perspective of others, leading us to a compassionate desire to discover more about those around us. Through the practice of wisdom, God will lead us into a loving understanding of how we can be the hands and feet of God to others. And with humility, we can be sure to make all these practices about bringing glory to God and not ourselves.

*“...the LORD has told you what is good,
and this is what he requires of you:
to do what is right, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God.”*

Micah 6:8

Bibliography

Bass, Dorothy C., and M. Shawn Copeland, eds. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. 2nd ed. The Practices of Faith Series. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Brown, William P. *Wisdom's Wonder: Character, Creation, and Crisis in the Bible's Wisdom Literature*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2014.

Glăveanu, Vlad P. *Wonder: The Extraordinary Power of an Ordinary Experience*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, DOI: 10.5040/9781350085183.

Halpern, Charles. *Making Waves and Riding the Currents: Activism and the Practice of Wisdom*. 1st ed. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler, 2008.

Kellenberger, James. "Humility." *Am. Philos. Q.* 47 (2010) 321–36.

O'Donohue, John, and John Quinn. *Walking in Wonder: Eternal Wisdom for a Modern World*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2018.

Stellar, Jennifer E., et al. "Awe and Humility." *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 114 (2018) 258–69, DOI: 10.1037/pspi0000109, <http://doi.apa.org/getdoi.cfm?doi=10.1037/pspi0000109>.

"Humility." In *Oxf. Lang.*, no date.

"Wisdom." In *Oxf. Lang.*, no date.

"Wonder." In *Oxf. Lang.*, no date.