

Theology and Poetry: Literary Aesthetics in the Writing of Ann Voskamp

A Thesis Proposal Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Masters of Arts in English

By
Erin Peters
May 1, 2018

Liberty University
College of Arts and Sciences
Master of Arts in English

Student Name: Erin Peters

Karen Swallow Prior, Ph.D. Date
Thesis Chair

Nicholas Olson, MFA. Date
Committee Member

Alexander Grant, MFA. Date
Committee Member

Table of Contents

Introduction—Literary Aesthetics and Art.....4

Chapter 1—Merging Narrative and Theology.....10

Chapter 2 – Orthodox Theology at the Center of Poetry42

Conclusion—Impact on Christian Literature, Women, and Culture75

Works Cited.....87

Introduction: Literary Aesthetics and Art

The debate over what qualifies as good literature is centuries old, particularly when it comes to Christian literature. However, this topic is especially relevant today when digital media continue to stretch our traditional understanding of how art and truth are represented. More specifically, where Christian literature oftentimes succeeds in sermonizing a given lesson, it lacks in artistic appeal. In “The Aesthetic Poverty of Evangelicalism,” Clyde S. Kilby addresses the aesthetic crisis in Christian literature. He argues that “contemporary evangelical Christianity[‘s]” lack of imagination presents “a great oddity”:

The people who spend the most time with the Bible are in large numbers the foes of art and the sworn foes of imagination. And I grow in the feeling that these people have quite an astonishing indifference to the created world. Evangelicals hear the great ‘I am’ of God, but they are far less aware of the ‘I am’ of his handiwork. Furthermore, when evangelicals dare attempt any art form it is generally done badly. (277)

This misunderstanding of art and style has caused a great void in the quality of work produced by Christians. Instead of viewing their creativity as a way to glorify God through their work, evangelicals often shun the imagination for fear of distracting from the moral of the writing.

Although Christian literature may at times overemphasize one aspect of writing at the expense of another, effective literature incorporates both form and content holistically. While discussing the “Nature of Literature,” Leland Ryken recognizes the distinctive role creative expression plays in determining the qualities of artful literature. He explains, “It is easy to see why readers find literature a source of enjoyment and refreshment: These effects are rooted in

the nature of literature itself. Literature is an art form—a craft or skill” (138). This characteristic is vital to maintain the purposes of literature. Regarding Christian literature, however, Kilby describes what has led to the absence of Christian works that are both instructive and enjoyable:

Evangelical Christians have had one of the purest of motives and one of the worst outcomes. The motive is never to mislead by the smallest fraction of an iota in the precise nature of salvation, to live it and state in its utter purity. But the unhappy outcome has too often been to elevate the cliché. The motive is that the gospel shall not be misunderstood, not sullied, not changed in jot or tittle. The outcome has often been merely the reactionary, static, and hackneyed. (278)

Though these intentions are honorable, the quality of Christian literature has suffered as a result of neglecting the inherent artistic qualities of literature. In his description of literature, Ryken also notes that “[a]rtistic joy or delight is one of the purposes of literature” (139). He continues, “Literature, by contrast, always adds an aesthetic purpose to the practical one. Its very form aims to give pleasure. Literary style and technique call attention to themselves and are experienced as something gratuitous, going beyond the functional needs of communication, possessing a refreshment or entertaining value that is self-rewarding” (139). Additionally, Jacques Maritain defines the role of the Christian artist in creating an authentic work: “If you want to make a Christian work, then be Christian, and simply try to make a beautiful work, into which your heart will pass; do not try to ‘make Christian’” (52). When Christian writers creatively communicate their content, they preserve the integrity of literature, bring glory to God, and serve others by simultaneously instructing and delighting them.

By combining the form and content of the literature, the literary aesthetics of a given work also apply to the writing's reception. Essentially, literary aesthetics include what authors write, how they communicate through the style of their writing, and the public's reaction to the holistic work. In *Aesthetics and Literature*, David Davies analyzes methods of interpreting and analyzing complex literature. He argues that when evaluating writing according to its literary aesthetics, it is also important to understand the nature and context of the work (16). Regarding poetic language and form, he suggests that "poetic texts demand, for their appreciation, techniques of reading which allow the texts to function as 'aesthetic symbols'" (15). Readers must also pay "close attention" to the way this form communicates the message (15). In addition to evaluating texts according to their literary purpose and function, it is also crucial that readers take into account the author's intentions in order to accurately interpret the writing: "in virtue of the creator's intention [. . .] the text serves as the vehicle of poetic artwork. [. . .] These understandings are assumed by the writer, and must be grasped by the reader if she is to 'get' the work" (16). In this sense, Davies places significant responsibility on the reader. He asserts that a close in-context reading of the text is crucial to effectively understanding and analyzing the literary aesthetics of an author's work.

Though some doubt the effectiveness of her writing, evaluating Ann Voskamp's literary aesthetics calls for an ability to evaluate doctrine and appreciate a poetic style. According to an article that named Voskamp one of the most influential women of evangelical church culture, Voskamp's signature style is described as "blend[ing] raw memoir with a contemplative, poetic style she [Voskamp] calls 'prosetry'" (Fields). Voskamp combines her memoirs with Scriptural applications and incorporates extended metaphors throughout her stories. For example, in *One Thousand Gifts*, after tracing humility in the Bible from Mary's acceptance of "supernatural

conception,” and Christ’s submission to the Father’s will in the garden, Voskamp reveals the moment she learned to humble herself by surrendering to God:

And I humbly open my hand to release my will to receive His, to accept His wind. I accept the gift of now as it is—*accept God*—for I can’t be receptive to God unless I receive what He gives. Joy’s light flickers, breathes, fueled by the will of God—fueled by Him. A shaft filters through an afternoon window and the cracks of the aged wood revive in sun. I pray. I let go. Lay the hand open. The sun slides across old hairline scars. My palm holds light. (181)

In her writing, Voskamp portrays the gospel through narrative theology; she explains the plot lines of the Bible and explores the implications for her own life. Her method of combining doctrine and personal experience through poetic prose in the format of a book is a particularly nuanced for contemporary religious literature. Because of her distinctive style, many critics have analyzed not only the orthodoxy of her message but also the literariness of her form. In his book review, one critic mentions common reactions to Voskamp’s work: “Voskamp likes to use language in unexpected ways, moving around the order of words, blurring the lines between prose and poetry so that a gift isn’t ‘tied with ribbon,’ but is ‘ribbon bound.’ Sentence fragments are acceptable, rules malleable. There is clearly a kind of appeal to it so that those who don’t hate it, love it” (Challies). While it certainly incites criticism, Voskamp’s work deserves to be evaluated holistically based on the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the poetic appeal of her style, and the responses from her contemporaries.

While her literary methods are unusual, Voskamp’s rise to prominence in Christian culture is perhaps even more unlikely. Rather than displaying prestigious academic credentials on her website biography, Voskamp lists her somewhat ordinary yet unusual background from a

Canadian pig farm: “I had a full-tuition scholarship to university and never finished. I married a Farmer instead & came home to gravel road & cornfields. I had babies. Half a dozen beautiful babies and one birthed from our heart and flown home from China” (“Meet Ann”). In fact, Voskamp approaches writing from a servant’s perspective. In an interview with Katelyn Beaty of *Christianity Today*, despite her unarguable publishing success, “Voskamp still won’t call herself a writer. She says that she’s a ‘wait-er’—[she explains,] ‘I have to wait on the Lord for words’” (“How Gratitude Made”). Also in response to her recognition as an instrumental woman in the church, Voskamp states, “I got down on my knees and prayed real hard, God using the absolute weakest and most unlikely” (“Meet Ann”). Although “her writing career started with a curriculum series in 2008,” (Beaty) Voskamp began blogging in 2004 where she used her webpage to journal her family’s experiences as a way to understand “what [she] was wrestling out with God” (Viola). This fundamental theme has continued in her books, blog posts, social media interactions, and speaking events. Through writing, Voskamp admittedly “preaches ugly self-sermons to herself” (“How to”) that may challenge others simultaneously. She acknowledges that “sometimes those who don’t seem to measure up, are part of changing the world beyond measure, are the unlikely who are called to be part of the unbelievable, so that God gets all the glory alone” (“About Who’s in Charge”). Voskamp’s perspective on herself as an unlikely author provides an insightful look into her unique literature.

With her unique blend of theology and poetic elements, Voskamp has the potential to expand the expectations of Christian literature for her audience of contemporary evangelicals. The style and content of her writing present an important discussion for the study of Christian literature: what role does poetry play in explaining theology? In *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, Malcom Guite discusses the enlarging role of imagination in conveying truth: “imagination and

aesthetic experience have as much right to be considered windows onto real truth as does purely rational argument” (49-50). The argument on the aesthetics of Christian literature is an ongoing debate, which centers around the impoverished imagination plaguing evangelical Christianity. Indeed, much of the dissension regarding Voskamp’s work is due in part to an underlying void in her audience’s literary imagination. While part of the controversy may result from a misreading or misinterpretation of Voskamp’s work, both critics’ and fans’ reactions do point to this imaginative crisis at the forefront of Christian culture today. However, it is the writer’s responsibility to maintain the integrity of Scripture while also providing instruction and enjoyment through creative expression. In the same way, the reader must also evaluate the content of the literature within the context of the writer’s form. According to Jacques Maritain in “Christian Art,” “Nevertheless, art will be Christian, and will reveal in its beauty the interior reflection of the radiance of grace, only if it overflows from a heart suffused by grace. [. . .] And if the beauty of the work is Christian, it is because the appetite of the artist is rightly disposed with regard to such a beauty, and because in the soul of the artist Christ is present through love” (54). Based on the quality of her literature, her statement of faith and perspective on writing, Ann Voskamp offers a literary expression of theology that warrants a critical evaluation.

Chapter One: Merging Narrative and Theology

Perhaps one of the most unique and intriguing aspects of Voskamp’s spiritually driven memoirs is the role of a single word to unite and propel the action of the narratives. In *One Thousand Gifts*, the driving force is the author’s discovery, definition, and application of the Greek word *eucharisteo* (32). Some, like Charles Morris of Haven Ministries, credit Voskamp with originating and popularizing the word *eucharisteo* through her book (“On the Farm”). In asking what can “lay a sure foundation under a life” and “[o]ffer the fullest life,” Voskamp dissects the origins of the transformational word by taking it back to the context of Scripture: “The face of Jesus flashes. Jesus, the God-Man with his own termination date. Jesus, the God-Man who came to save me from prisons of fear and guilt and depression and sadness. With an expiration of less than twelve hours, what does Jesus count as all most important? ‘And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them... (Luke 22:19 NIV) (31). Upon further study, Voskamp reveals the word’s etymology and offers it as the answer to the question of how to live the fullest life:

I thumb, run my finger across the pages of the heavy and thick books bound. I read it slowly. In the original language, ‘he gave thanks’ reads *eucharisteo*.’ I underline it on the page [. . .] The root word of *eucharisteo* is *charis*, meaning ‘grace.’ Jesus took the bread and saw it as *grace* and gave thanks. He took the bread and knew it to be *gift* and gave thanks. But there is more, and I read it. *Eucharisteo*, thanksgiving, envelopes the Greek word for grace, *charis*. But it also holds its derivative, the Greek word *chara*, meaning ‘joy.’ *Joy*. Ah...yes. I might be needing me some of that. That might be what the quest for more is all about—

that which Augustine claimed, ‘Without exception...all try their hardest to reach the same goal, that is, joy.’ (32)

In this explanation, Voskamp outlines the basis for the rest of the memoir. Throughout the book, she retraces the significance of the singular word *eucharisteo*: “I whisper it out loud, let the tongue feel these sounds, the ear hear their truth. *Charis*. Grace. *Eucharisteo*. Thanksgiving. *Chara*. Joy. A triplet of stars, a constellation in the black. A threefold cord that might hold a life? Offer a way up into the fullest life? Grace, thanksgiving, joy. *Eucharisteo*. A Greek word... that might make meaning of everything?” (33). By repeatedly using *eucharisteo* to explore the implications of the theology, Voskamp applies the meaning of the word particularly in her own quest to live with abundant joy. In this way, the author uses narrative theology to communicate the doctrine she engages with in the drama of her everyday life.

After establishing *eucharisteo* as “the central symbol of Christianity,” (34) Voskamp further develops her story through the theological exposition of *koinonia* in *The Broken Way*. Building upon the groundwork in *One Thousand Gifts*, Voskamp continues “a dare for the next leg of the journey, the way leading higher up and deeper in, daring me to let all the not-enough there in my open hands” (31). This “dare” builds on *eucharisteo* and is introduced into the context of the Lord’s Supper; *koinonia* is the application of *eucharisteo* in a communal setting. Voskamp explains, “My mind’s spinning, wrapping around what is happening here: the Last Supper embodies the fullest DNA of the body of Christ, of the church. Giving thanks—then breaking and giving. The doxology, then discipleship. The *eucharisteo*, then *koinonia*” (49). In this section, the author unfolds the chronological process of how she came to understand the doctrine that takes effect in a believer’s life. Voskamp defines her progressive understanding of the term, thereby inserting herself into the theological storyline: “I’d understood it only as

communion, as fellowship, but it's so much more, no less than full participation in Christ's brokenness and givenness, a deeper union with Him. I feel it now: *koinonia* is no mere symbol, but this miraculous embrace that can end our abandonment, our aloneness. It's this enveloping relationship of the outstretched cross, sharing in the oneness of the very life of Christ" (48). Interestingly, in *Heavenly Participation*, Hans Boersma also addresses how abiding fellowship with Christ will transform earthly communion with both God and others:

For Paul, it is not as though believers here on earth somehow identify with a faraway place called 'heaven.' Rather, they have a real or participatory connection with heaven. [. . .] Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension—is something Christians participate in: God 'made us alive with Christ,' Paul insists (Eph. 2:5). He 'raised us up with Christ' (Eph. 2.6; Col. 3.1). The result of this sharing in Christ is that believers participated in heavenly realities. (4-5)

Actively participating in Christ's sacrificial atonement is essential to understanding the believer's position in the biblical narrative. Throughout her book, Voskamp branches off this fundamental doctrine and definition of *koinonia* in the narratives that result from her study. She also foreshadows the idea of living "cruciform" by suggesting that *koinonia* is "this enveloping relationship of the outstretched cross," thus a natural extension of *koinonia* (48).

In her memoirs, Voskamp uses narrative theology to show that the narrator grows with her understanding of doctrine. Voskamp's spiritual memoir continues through the developing connection of *eucharisteo* and *koinonia*. She retraces her steps in *One Thousand Gifts* and shows the path that leads her to this subsequent discovery. She recognizes, "*Eucharisteo*—Jesus embracing and giving thanks for His not-enough—that preceded the miracle. But why hadn't I been awakened at the detonation of the revelation before? What was the actual miracle? The

miracle happens in the breaking” (30). Here, Voskamp reviews the process of spiritual transformation and introduces the framework for the second book, which is essentially the culmination of a religious pilgrimage. The relationship between these two Greek words unifies the narrator’s spiritual journey by demonstrating the practical application of theology in a continued narrative format.

Reactions to Voskamp’s Theological Narrative

By grounding her books in the definition of a singular word, Voskamp reveals a commitment to Biblical exposition. However, some believe that Voskamp focusses too much on concepts like *eucharisteo* and *koinonia* at the expense of other doctrines. Rachael Marie Stone in “Why Gratitude is Not Enough,” shares her concerns regarding overemphasizing one element of Scripture as an answer to thoughtful questions:

I get nervous when any concept—even a biblical one—is offered as the key that opens all locks. Scripture is far too deep and broad to be placed under a single heading. There's the risk of stretching all passages on the rack of our concept until they confess what we want them to say. I get it that gratitude has been transformative for Voskamp, who once struggled mightily with anxiety, pessimism, and agoraphobia. But in this book she preaches *eucharisteo* in a way that seems to make the concept a new law, a practice necessary to live a truly Christian life. (“Why Gratitude”)

Stone represents a legitimate and important concern that by elevating *eucharisteo* to this degree, the concept may be removed from its significance in context with other doctrines that it works corporately with. She continues, “But one major weakness of One Thousand Gifts is that it

threatens to flatten all of Scripture to fit Voskamp's eucharisteo vision" ("Why Gratitude").

Although it is possible for Jesus' teaching to be unintentionally misused, Voskamp dismisses the idea that she overemphasizes the doctrine of *eucharisteo* while neglecting other core theological truths. After carefully studying these passages in the "original[ly] published language" (32) of the Bible, Voskamp explains that instead of misusing or usurping the primary focus of Christianity, *eucharisteo* is an age-old practice initiated by Christ in the gospels:

It really might be the mystery to the fullest life... I lie on relief. I might have found the holy grail...and lost it, moved on. And yet really—hadn't God set the holy grail in the center of Christianity? *Eucharisteo*, it's the central symbol of Christianity. Thanksgiving. The table with its emblems is the essence of what it means to live the Christ-life. Sunday after Sunday in our nondenominational Bible church, we're formally invited to take the bread, the wine. Doesn't the continual repetition of beginning our week at the table of the Eucharist clearly place the whole of our lived into the context of thanksgiving? (34)

Rather than overemphasizing *eucharisteo* and overlooking the faith-based nature of salvation, Voskamp instead argues that eucharisteo is an integral component of Christianity and is largely unstudied and underdeveloped. As a result, Voskamp journals the narrative of her spiritual journey through the process of *eucharisteo*.

Contributing to Voskamp's expositional treatment of orthodox theology, her historical narrative of *koinonia* also suggests careful research and study. She recognizes the origins of longing for true fellowship with the Creator and traces it back to the Bible:

There's a thrumming across the sanctuary, across the whole universe: we aren't merely called to get to know Christ; we are called to participate in complete union with Christ. He breaks and gives His life to the broken. And in communion—*koinonia*—the broken get to live given to Him, the God who sought intimate *koinonia* walking in the garden with Adam, who purposed a close communing with Enoch, who spoke face-to-face with Moses, as a man speaks to his closest friend [. . .] We are made partakers (*koinonia*) of Christ and the divine nature, and He comes in a radical act of *koinonia* and makes His home tending to our aching places. There's this pulsing through my surrendered wounds: 'You, God, are my God, earnestly I seek you. I thirst for you, my whole being longs for you, in a dry and parched land where there is no water.' (48)

In this section, Voskamp expresses the meaning of *koinonia* by placing herself in the Biblical narrative. She understands that just as God desired a close walk with men and women of faith in the Old Testament, still today He offers that intimate experience even among those with “brazen hands” in a “country chapel on Sunday morning” (39). Though not explicitly stated, by drawing from verses in the New Testament, (2 Peter 1:4 and John 14:23) Voskamp shows the doctrine of the indwelling Christ in the believer. She then responds to the gospel by repeating the prayer of Psalm 63:1. In the context of narrative theology, this passage intersects the presence of God in the Old Testament with His active participation in the present. It also illustrates that focusing on *koinonia*, for example, is still relevant and inherent in Biblical theology both in the days of the patriarchs and in the present.

In addition to her reservations about the redemptive power of *eucharisteo*, Stone also critiques Voskamp's doctrine of suppressing righteous indignation. She recounts instances where

Voskamp's children "throw toast" at each other and "break a glass cabinet" (Stone). She explains that "Voskamp's stream-of-consciousness wrestling to be grateful for everything strikes me as not necessarily biblical" (Stone). Although Stone recognizes the power of self-composure and personal discipline, she argues that "Jesus did tip over some tables in his day, and crying out and complaining to God in the midst of suffering (not merely accepting it with gratitude) has a long and venerable history" ("Why Gratitude"). Providing further support against "the Zen-like acceptance Voskamp appears to advocate," Stone cites Job as a testament of righteous anger before God ("Why Gratitude"). In response to a similar family argument, Voskamp relays the doctrine behind her claim to "fully enter into the moment" (73):

I've staked my claim to the miracle. I know the way to the Promised Land. I do what I always need to do. I preach it. I preach it to the person I need to preach to the most. I preach to me. [. . .] *Stay calm, enter the moment, give thanks* [. . .] *And I can always give thanks because an all powerful God always has all these things—all things—always under control.* I breathe deep and He preaches to me, soothing the time-frenzied soul with the grace river in whisper. *Life is not an emergency. Life is eucharisteo.* (74)

While Voskamp does agree that a peaceful, controlled reaction to difficulty is certainly admirable, she does not preach a doctrine contrary to Scripture. Instead, Voskamp recognizes her tendency to impulsively react to frustrating situations. When her children carelessly storm inside, accidentally injure, and argue with one another, Voskamp acknowledges, "More stress? I can feel my pulse quicken fierce. Entering fully into the moment can overwhelm, a river running wild. I will forget, and again, and again, but today I do remember. I breathe and I reel and I hold my ground and my tongue in this torrent coming down [. . .] in Christ, the most urgent

necessitates a slow and steady reverence” (73-74). In fact, she argues for composure based on the meaning of God’s name, which she writes, signifies the reason why tranquility is possible: “This is where God is. In the present. I AM—His very name. I want to take shoes off. I AM, so full of the weight of the present, that time’s river slows to a still...and God Himself is timeless (69). Rather than acting on emotional impulse, Voskamp instead relies on her understanding of *eucharisteo* to undergird her interactions with others during times of stress and disappointment.

Although these examples demonstrate one critic’s primary concerns with Voskamp’s treatment of theological doctrine, still others express discomfort with her personal narrative regarding spiritual intimacy with God. At the culmination of her spiritual journey, Voskamp finds herself in Paris with a friend where she, despite initial reservations, discovers the passageway into a deeper experience with God. She writes, in the chapter titled, “The Joy of Intimacy,” “I fly to Paris and discover how to make love to God” (201). Though this statement may appear unsettling, given the context and style of the writing, it is clear that Voskamp is simply continuing the narrative of her spiritual growth in metaphoric language intentionally designed to arrest and ignite an audience of (possibly complacent) believers. She explains that she “hears” the love song spoken of in Zephaniah 3, and she continues: “He chose me—us! To be His bride! True, that’s the intellectual premise of the Christian life, but only as the gifts are attended, not as ends but as means to gaze into the heart of God, does the premise become personal, God’s choosing so utterly passionate. *So utterly fulfilling*” (204). Voskamp uses symbolic language commonly associated with marriage, such as “consummation,” (211), “courted by God” (211), and “God as husband in sacred wedlock” (213). Throughout the chapter, Voskamp details the exchange that takes place between herself and God on her “own journey of transformation into the full life” (209). However, during her controversial exposition,

she frequently cites related passages of Scripture and commentary from well-known Bible scholars and pastors, including A.W. Tozer and C.S. Lewis among others, emphasizing that she is making a valid theological point in effectively jarring metaphorical language. Among these excerpts, she includes a segment from John Calvin: “God very commonly takes on the character of a husband to us. Indeed, the union by which he binds us to himself when he receives us into the bosom of the church is like sacred wedlock [. . .] Therefore that joining together of head and members, that indwelling of Christ in our hearts—in short that mystical union—are accorded by us the highest degree of importance” (213). This example illustrates that although critics may debate the effectiveness of Voskamp’s shocking comparisons, she does indeed make use of a “common” (Calvin) Biblical metaphor of Christ and the church, an example with which her evangelical audience would most likely be fairly well acquainted.

Along this line of criticism, Tim Challies comments on the “sexuality and ecstasy” in Voskamp’s lyrical representation of spiritual intimacy with Christ. He cites her excerpt: “God makes love with grace upon grace, every moment a making of His love for us. [. . .] Couldn’t I make love to God, making every moment love for Him? To know Him the way Adam knew Eve. Spirit skin to spirit skin” (217). In response to this example, Challies writes, “It is true, of course, that the Bible uses imagery of bride and groom to describe the relationship of Christ to his church, but it does not go as far as integrating the sexual component of marriage. Sometimes it is best to allow God to define the parameters of our metaphors rather than taking them to a much greater extent. Voskamp would have done well to limit herself here” (“One Thousand Gifts”). Challies represents many who argue that Voskamp’s symbolic narrative depicts perhaps more than Scripture teaches on the subject of cultivating a close walk with God.

Although Challies recognizes that Voskamp uses Scriptural premises not unlike Song of Solomon, he addresses the limits of metaphoric language to build on marital illustrations between Christ and His church throughout both Old and New Testaments. For example, one spokesman, Marvin Olasky of *World*, responds to this criticism and cites several examples of similar writing practiced by the Puritans and others:

It is good to have a high view of Scripture and want to protect it against those who would diminish God's Word. Some writers do misuse and abuse Scripture. Voskamp's use of imagery [in the last chapter of *One Thousand Gifts*] to show the intimacy of our relationship to God, has raised the question, 'If we, as Christians, were supposed to think about our relationship with God in sexual terms, wouldn't God have made that clear in His word?' Well, He did describe the relationship in those terms, repeatedly and explicitly in the Song of Solomon and in the prophets, both positively and negatively; see, for example, Ezekiel 16. I once taught a course on Puritan writing, and I recall that they used imagery in the same way Voskamp does, without people doubting their orthodoxy. ("20 Thoughts")

By referencing Puritan literature, Olasky acknowledges their practice of sometimes presenting doctrine through poetry or stylistic language. On the subject of their writing style, Martin Brow in his article, "In Defense of the Puritans," studies the Puritan approach to writing about theology and critical reactions to their descriptive language (2). These responses, in some way, resemble the charges made against Voskamp's literature, particularly in the area of Scriptural metaphors. Additionally, in Olasky's response, he explains, "Since it's beyond us to know the depths of God's love but not beyond us to grasp marital love, God describes the former by the latter. Good writers convey the unknown by showing us what we know — and using that to explain what we

don't know" ("Intimacy"). While combatting the claims that Voskamp's doctrine is questionable and poorly integrated into her writing, Olasky credits hymn writer Isaac Watts with recognizing the connection between pastors who preached in passionate language similar to Song of Solomon ("My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away," 2.10). Essentially, in this chapter, though unusually illustrated, Voskamp presents no new doctrine outside of what is ordained in Scripture.

Undoubtedly however, the question regarding Scriptural authority arises when addressing how Voskamp connects her personal experience to Scripture while using the extended metaphor of sexual intimacy. In his essay on the aesthetics and the Christian, Clyde Kilby notes, "It is hardly necessary to remark that the break between Christianity and art is only a single instance of today's spiritual malaise [. . .] We are scared of imagination, scared of the really fruitful generalization, scared very little of the authority of God but deeply afraid of the authority of scholarship" ("The Christian and the Arts"). Regarding the imagination Voskamp employs in her metaphor of spiritual intimacy, she speaks as a woman outside of the ordained structure of the church; her repurposing of the intimate imagery between Christ and the church may seem to be taken too literally for some. Although critics largely recognize that Voskamp's metaphor is rooted in Scripture, they argue that by distorting the metaphor originally intended to be seen between Christ and the church collectively, Voskamp instead extends the boundaries of the Biblical metaphor to herself as a version of personal intimacy she shares alone with Christ.

With her emphasis on the believer's personal experience with Christ, Voskamp highlights the role of individualism in contemporary evangelicalism. In Christian culture today, the focus has gradually shifted away from the community of believers in the church to the individual's personal relationship with God. In his evaluation of narrative theology, Fackre hints

at the growth of individualistically focused Christian literature that highlights a believer's journey to sanctification (194). Because the Bible typically speaks of Christ's relationship with His bride as the church corporately, critics express discomfort when Voskamp extends the metaphor and applies it to herself solely as an individual outside the confines of the church. Although these allegations do raise important questions regarding the limits of Biblical metaphor and imagination, by repeatedly referencing verses that align with her claims about an intimate spiritual union with Christ that is available to all believers, she recognizes that her own experience simply reflects what Christ freely offers to His children, as seen throughout Song of Solomon and ultimately throughout the Bible.

Aside from his accusations about doctrinal irregularities related to sensuality and mysticism, in his book review, Challies cautions that many may find *One Thousand Gifts* "dangerous" and discouraging due to Voskamp's elusive demonstration of spiritual ascent. He reasons that "What she finds, what she models, is absent from the Bible" (Challies). This statement regarding Voskamp's seemingly mystical union with Christ apparently operates under the assumption that since the narrator describes a powerful spiritual climax, others may view themselves incapable of experiencing a similar walk with Christ; essentially, they may put her up on a pedestal. However, because of the narrator's vulnerability and transparency, Voskamp has established a rapport with an audience that is likely to identify with her expressions of weakness, mediocrity, and even failures. Additionally, through Voskamp's increasing transparency in *The Broken Way*, Philip Yancey of *Christianity Today* notes that Voskamp "has chosen to decline the mantle of spiritual guru and instead to become even more intimately vulnerable" (1). This foundation has the potential to unite the reader with similar experiences the author shares. Therefore, instead of stunting a reader's spiritual growth, Voskamp's "biographical account"

(Challies) may indeed challenge readers with the knowledge that God desires the same level of fellowship with them. Even in spite of the possible shortcomings of the writing, Micha Boyett of *Christianity Today* claims that Voskamp's work "is changing [her] life, not because gratitude is the key to salvation, but because gratefulness brings [her] into God's presence every time" ("*One Thousand Gifts Reconsidered*"). Despite the arguments against the book's Biblical validity, this statement indicates the potential influence of a work whose underlying premise is founded in a narrative presentation of Scripture.

In her writing, a major component of Voskamp's literary aesthetics is her representation of Scripture. While narrating fragmented memoirs, Voskamp applies Biblical passages to the lessons of her life story. This method reveals her commitment to scholarly exposition and literariness. Instead of incorporating Gospel themes in traditional prose resembling a sermon, Voskamp exposes practical truth lyrically through narrative. Her method also lends itself to visual format. Through her imagery and explanations, Voskamp provides a narrative portrayal of orthodox Christianity.

Narrative Theology (as a script)

In Ann Voskamp's work, several distinct elements contribute to her unique literary aesthetics. Though her content is primarily theologically focused, she poetically interweaves personal experiences into a spiritual memoir. Through her spiritual reflections on personal experiences, the author adopts the voice of both a narrator in her descriptive memoirs and a preacher in her pointed sermonettes. In her writing, Voskamp merges both narrative and theological elements into book length examples of the theory and practice of narrative theology.

Narrative theology involves viewing the Bible as a plot line, which enables people to see their own lives as stories within the framework of the Gospel. While discussing theology as the storyline of the Bible, in “Narrative Theology from an Evangelical Perspective,” Gabriel Fackre applies narrative theology to Christian literature. He defines this approach to studying the Bible and Christian literature:

[Narrative theology is] the discernment of a plot in the ways of God and the deployment of story as a means of describing it. To be noted is the variety encompassed in this idea and its current practice, ranging from narrative theologies that focus on our personal or social stories, to those whose subject matter is the study of Scripture's manifold tales, to those who are concerned about the overarching ‘cult epic’ that gives the church its identity. (190)

Narrative theology is based on the idea that Christians can understand their purpose in God’s plan by inserting themselves into the plotline of Scripture. Voskamp’s writing reflects this combination of theological exposition and practical application.

From published books to blog posts, narrative theology underpins Voskamp’s work. Even in the personal introduction to her webpage, she explains her perspective on the relationship between writing and living out the words she finds in Scripture:

[B]ut honestly? The only words that really matter? Are the ones I live. This convicts me. I keep writing it out here every day, the words I am seeking to live—about this wondrously, messy, everyday-holy life...about finding the beauty and quiet, about slowing to see the sacred in the chaos, the Cross in the clothespin, the flame in the bush. Just listening—laundry, liturgy, life—all of life, holy ground. A

holy experience—because God has flaming bushes everywhere. It'd be pure grace to walk a bit, you and I—to live the words together... (“Meet”)

Through her writing, Voskamp claims to have a responsibility to evangelize and maintain an abiding walk with God. After reading passages of the Bible, she essentially writes herself into the story and seeks to live out the implications for her own life. In this way, she vicariously invites others to not only understand what they read in the Bible, but to also incorporate themselves into the larger framework of the Gospel narrative.

How Voskamp Uses Narrative Theology

In both of her primary books, *One Thousand Gifts* and *The Broken Way*, Voskamp traces her personal experiences in past and present as the backdrop for her Biblical exposition. In these books, she places herself within God's plan to “redeem” and restore her (187), which she bases on His promises in Scripture. Looking back and speaking to her former self, Voskamp recognizes the presence of God in her life. During times of tragedy, triumph, physical torment, and moments of revelation, Voskamp weaves the truth of the Bible into her own stories, thereby conveying the basic premise of narrative theology.

In *One Thousand Gifts*, Voskamp's opening scene introduces the childhood memory of the brutal death of her younger sister. She relives the horror of seeing her father carry a blood soaked blanket wrapped around the youngest daughter Aimee who had been tragically killed by a milk truck in the family's driveway (11). From there, she increases her vulnerability by exposing instances of numbing pain and dissatisfaction in her life, such as suppressing her desire to self-harm and defeating the paralysis of depression. Along the way, Voskamp shares stories about the moments she has spent alone or with her children at surgical waiting rooms, dinner

tables, and the kitchen sink. The conclusion of the memoir takes place in Paris where she experiences controversial intimacy with God. In her stories of encountering others and God in everyday places, Voskamp embodies spiritual messages in concrete stories, which demonstrates the practice of narrative theology.

Using narrative theology, Voskamp essentially enters the storyline as character in her own memoir. In his explanation of narrative theology, Fackre discusses the author's literary role in the spiritual journey. He says, "Pattern becomes plot, participants become characters, and movement has directionality through conflict toward resolution" (190). Working as both the narrator and subject of the story's action, Voskamp controls the direction of the memoir. She writes, "Memory's surge burns deep," (10) but "faith thanks God in the middle of the story" (*The Broken Way* 135). While in her role as narrator, Voskamp functions as a character seeking out her place in God's plan. She begins by remembering the breaking point that stirred her searching:

That staining of her blood scorches me, but less than the blister of seeing her uncovered, lying there. She had only toddled into the far lane, wandering after a cat, and I can see the delivery truck driver sitting at the kitchen table, his head in his hands, and I remember how he sobbed that he had never seen her. But I still see her, and I cannot forget. Her body, fragile and small, crushed by a truck's load in our farmyard, blood soaking into the thirsty, track-beaten earth. That's the moment the cosmos shifted, shattering any cupping of hands. I can still hear my mother's witnessing-scream, see my father's eyes shot white through. (10)

Here, the author introduces the action and emotions that cause her to ask the painful question: "We accept the day of her death as an accident. But an act allowed by God?" (11). Looking back at the tragedy, Voskamp acts as both narrator and protagonist in this particular scene. This

opening sets the framework for the rest of the book.

Throughout the timeline of the book, the author also discovers the presence of God in the narrative of her life. From discovering sunlight in soap bubbles to revealing answers to prayer, Voskamp includes God as an active participant in the book. In fact, this recognition of God's presence hints at the greater role of personal experience and divine encounters in a Christian's daily life. In Kilby's *The Arts and the Christian Imagination*, he affirms the theological premise Voskamp illustrates through her memoirs on experiencing Christ in the mundane:

Christianity holds all valuable things to be valuable toward an end simply because man himself is purposed and purposive, being created *imago Dei* with all the rights, privileges, and obligations appertaining. The Incarnation prepared the way for Christians to discern value in small, even crude things, just as Christ took lamp stands, a mustard seed, a bit of money, or a wineskin to symbolize great spiritual significance. Such a perspective prevents all likelihood of artistic snobbery. ("Decline and Fall of the Christian Imagination")

Continuing on the topic of the communicative presence of God in the world, Tozer also recognizes the active role of God's shaping the individual through their interactions with Him in the created world. In *The Pursuit of God*, he writes, "A spiritual kingdom lies all about us, enclosing us, embracing us, altogether within reach of our inner selves, waiting for us to recognize it. God Himself is here waiting our response to His presence. This eternal world will come to us the moment we begin to reckon upon its reality" (50). In this vein, Voskamp continues the conversation surrounding her place in God's presence:

I ache-gaze on bits and blades of creation and all things created fade, diminish, and only the features of the Creator shimmer, magnified. My eye sees through to

the heights and Him and things beneath are seen for what they are: but finite talismans pointing up. That full moon rising higher holds me rapt. This is where I see it.

God always sits here. (117)

In this illustration, Voskamp reveals the active presence of God in the midst of her searching for His existence. She later discovers that God's glory can equally be found within the mundane as well as the marvelous.

While Voskamp's writing illustrates the general idea that God is at work in the Christian's life, in evangelicalism, narrative theology may take different forms. According to Fackre, one of these approaches includes "the believer's spiritual journey" (191). With this application, a Christian's religious development leads to discovering a deeper relationship between the individual and God. Continuing, Fackre writes, "it is surely right that evangelicalism brings to the fore subjective soteriology, the personal 'application of the benefits' of the Work of Christ. Here then is a second aspect of the evangelical story tradition, its *pro me* accent, the emphasis on 'my story.' Its background is the conversion experience and/or continuing companionship of the believer with Christ" (191). Clearly, Voskamp's evangelical audience would recognize the significance of spiritual memoir. Such writing demonstrates Voskamp's "own journey of transformation into the full life" (209) that culminates in a description of her renewed communion with the Creator.

In *One Thousand Gifts*, not only does Voskamp include God as a literary presence and character in her narrative memoir, but she also reflects His voice through the Scripture in the imagined dialogue. In this way, she structures her story in a recurring conversation where she

presents a problem, asks a question, and turns to God to supply the answer. For example, after bringing her son home to heal from an operation, Voskamp explores the goodness of God in the midst of pain and despair:

I feel around the back of the medicine cupboard for the bottle. I squint hard, but I can't read the cryptic, indecipherable text of injured farm boys, anemic marriages, terminal mamas ...war, famine, disease. What do all the words written in the world really spell out? I had read it in Job, what makes reading God's message in every moment a form of art, fullest life: God speaks to us not in one language but two: 'For God does speak—now one way, now another' (33:14 NIV). One way, His finger writing words in stars (Psalm 19:1-3), His eternal power written naked in all creation (Romans 1:20); and now another way, the sharp Holy Writ on the page that makes a careful incision into a life, blade words that kindly cut the tissue back to where soul and spirit join, tenderly laying bare the intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

I hold the medicine bottle, but have I found pills for the pain? (86 -87)

Throughout her writing, Voskamp continues this pattern of conversational narrative. Many of her spiritual revelations occur within her own private moments as opposed to a communal setting; however, the answers to her relatable questions are supported by the Bible verses she references. Here she presents new resolve to continue her fellowship with Christ:

To read His message in moments, I'll need to read His passion on the page; wear the lens of the Word, to read His writing in the world. Only the Word is the answer to rightly reading the world, because The Word has nail-scarred hands that

cup our face close, wipe away the tears running down, has eyes to look deep into our brimming ache, and whisper, ‘I know. I *know*.’ The passion on the page is a Person, and the lens I wear of the Word is not abstract idea but the eyes of the God-Man who came and *knows* the pain. (87)

In this passage, Voskamp recognizes that the Person of God often speaks through the Word of God, as noted in John 1. With a theological focus to her story, Voskamp incorporates herself and God as characters with continuing dialogue that direct the course of the narrative. In this example, Voskamp implements conversation into the theological narrative.

Within the context of narrative theology as a dialogue with God through His Word, Voskamp also reveals the conflict between her “characters.” The tension between obeying God amidst uncertainty and lacking the faith to do so contributes to the realistic, relatable nature of her writing. Many can easily associate with the problems and questions Voskamp wrestles with in her diary-like reflections. In addition to her books, Voskamp continues to address the difficulty of maintaining communication with God in her “(Brutally) Honest Psalms Series.” She pleads, “Where in the mess of things are you, God? Where are you who unlock the wind from its storehouses, who raises the seas from the deep, who can calm the waves and the winds and the wall of worries that drown us in a hurricane of whipping hurry and pain?” (“Done”). Fashioned after the heartfelt Psalms of David in the Old Testament, these contemporary “psalms” reveal the age old battle for faith in God in the midst of natural disasters and personal loss. However, after apparently waiting on God for the answers, the conversation continues with the response to Voskamp’s inquiries. Here, the tone noticeably changes to one of composure and hopefulness: “*Where are you, God? God is in you, the redeemed and the claimed and the named, God is in you, always rising and raising you up again [. . .] And there is love resurrecting around us and in*

us and even now, those brave enough to sit with the honest psalms, feel an awakening to all this resilient grace” (“Done”). Through the metaphorical dialogue between the symbolic characters in her writing, Voskamp creates an active exchange that invites others to connect with their own uncertainties and find answers in Scripture.

The Theology in Voskamp’s Narrative

In Voskamp’s writing, telling her own story is a creative outlet for Biblical exegesis. Her work demonstrates how the Bible can help interpret personal experience. Also at times, Voskamp shows how her personal experiences increase her understanding of God’s Word. For example, In *One Thousand Gifts*, after sharing the memory of her sister’s untimely death, Voskamp traces the emotional unrest and spiritual dissatisfaction that followed for years to come. She confesses, “All my eyes can seem to fixate on are the splatters of disappointment across here and me” (31). And again, “If I’m ruthlessly honest, I may have said yes to God, yes to Christianity, but really, I have lived the no. I have. Infected by that Eden mouthful, the retina of my soul develops macular holes of blackness. From my very own beginning, my sister’s death tears a hole in the canvas of the world” (16). Here, and throughout the book, Voskamp allows her story to tell the greater narrative of God’s sovereign will. She acknowledges, “There is a Storyteller who writes Himself into the story and makes our souls well, because He walks with us until the story is finished in His perfect time, and His perfect way, for His perfect glory — so our souls are always well” (“Why God”). This illustration supports Fackre’s definition of narrative theology in evangelical texts. He notes, “Latent in the individual stories told is a larger plot. The tale of creation, the fall, the covenant with Noah, God’s election of Israel, the coming and redemptive deed of Jesus Christ, the birth of the church, the salvation of souls and sometimes society, the hope for the final resolution in the End —all this is the Big Story” (192).

Incorporating her stories to emphasize the “Big Story,” Voskamp’s spiritual memoir aligns with this aspect of narrative theology. For example, following her admission that she “hunger[s] for filling in a world that is starved,” (17) Voskamp unfolds God’s “purpose for us,” (17) contrary to her own ideas:

But from that Garden beginning, God has had a different purpose for us. His intent, since He bent low and breathed His life into the dust of our lungs, since He kissed us into being, has never been to slyly orchestrate our ruin. [. . .] I open a Bible, and His plans, startling, lie there barefaced. [. . .] His love letter forever silences any doubts: ‘His secret purpose framed from the very beginning [is] to bring us to our full glory’ (1 Corinthians 2:7 NEB). He means to rename us—to return us to our true names, our truest selves. He means to heal our soul holes. From the very beginning, that Eden beginning, that has always been and always is, to this day, His secret purpose—our return to *our full glory*. (17)

In connection with the story of the cross, Voskamp places her experiences in line with God’s ultimate plan for good. She acknowledges, “Telling my brokenhearted story is simply telling how The Greatest Story ever told has completely changed mine” (“Meet Ann”). However this statement naturally gives rise to greater ambiguity regarding that lack of authority in biblical interpretation. Since Voskamp channels Scripture through personal experience, undoubtedly the question also arises whether either the theology or narrative is diminished in some way. Yet Voskamp uses her stories as stepping stones into theological exposition. As a result, others can visualize the application of Biblical exegesis.

As an example of the pattern of narrative and exposition in her books, immediately following the revelation of God’s purpose in her life, Voskamp identifies the origin of the Latin

word “grace” in the face of her terminally ill infant nephew. She writes, “From the very beginning, that Eden beginning [. . .] God’s had this wild secretive plan. *He means to fill us with glory again*. With glory and grace. Grace, it means ‘favor,’ from the Latin *gratia*. It connotes a free readiness. [. . .] (17) The day I met my brother-in-law at the back door, looking for his brother [. . .] is the day I see it clear as a full moon rising bright over January snow, that choice, saying yes or no to God’s graces, is the linchpin of it all, of everything” (18). Through this section, Voskamp defines the implications of grace and shows this idea in action. In this way, she draws the connection between theory and practice.

Through her writing, Voskamp connects with the narratives in Scripture and applies their spiritual significance to her own. Connecting the biblical story to the Christian’s story is another aspect of narrative theology. According to Fackre, “Evangelical narrative is the linkage of the Christian Story to the believer’s story through biblical stories. It is the Christian faith lived at the juncture of personal, ecclesial, and biblical narrative. [. . .] the biblical stories are held to be polyvalent in meaning with a richness commensurate with myriad life situations. Thus, the Bible comes alive as I let it ‘look me in the eye’” (194). Throughout *One Thousand Gifts* and *The Broken Way*, Voskamp frequently integrates various forms of narrative theology in communicating her message with the Gospel. In her writing, Voskamp’s method of connecting personal experiences to the stories in Scripture contributes to her ability to place herself in line with the larger framework of the ongoing biblical narrative.

In line with spiritual storytelling, Voskamp outlines her role in crafting the memoir, yet she also explains where she surrenders the metaphorical pen to God and gives Him control to write her story. As the prequel to her second book, *One Thousand Gifts* candidly seeks out fulfilling a “dare to an emptier, fuller life” (23) by receiving both good and bad from the hand of

God as grace. In doing so, Voskamp longs “to live full of grace and joy and all that is beauty eternal” (23). She recognizes this journey as being “this story—my story” (23), in which when answers are beyond finding out, she allows God to write for her. She explains, “Writing is this act of faith — a bit like driving in the fog: you can hardly see just in front of you. But you trust God’s leading you and you just write into the space you can see ahead of you” (Voskamp). Essentially, Voskamp claims to yield her life and literature to God’s control; she writes about surrender as a response to God’s authority in her life. Voskamp acknowledges, “There’s a reason I am not writing the story and God is. He knows how it all works out, where it all leads, what it all means. *I don’t*” (21). Through her imagined dialogue with God and her references to His words in Scripture, Voskamp gives place to God’s design in His master plan. While discussing the literary implications of evangelical narrative in this instance, Fackre notes, “The *pro me* character of evangelical narrative suggests its readiness to affirm and appropriate aspects of personal life story narrative theology” (194). Voskamp crafts her memoir in such a way that draws attention to God’s sovereignty amidst uncertainty. Because of this design, Voskamp can offer meaning to the seemingly insignificant or painful experiences she exposes in her books, which simultaneously invites others to see their own lives in the same way. She recognizes that God is in control and ultimately yields to his will in her life. She allows herself to be a tool in God’s hand to bring others to Himself and honor Him.

Narrative theology serves a uniquely binding force between both *One Thousand Gifts* and the succeeding *The Broken Way*. Naturally, where the first book begins the *Dare to Live Fully Right Where You Are*, *The Broken Way* functions as a sequel in applying *A Daring Path into the Abundant Life* by reaching out into a hurting world with the grace that Christ bestows in the midst of personal brokenness. Essentially, with the continuing spiritual pilgrimage in *The Broken*

Way, Voskamp demonstrates that in her intimate journey into the knowledge of Christ, He does not simply leave her seeking; instead, she discovers God's presence in the concrete details of her settings and through His Word while learning her purpose in God's timeline, thereby perpetuating her theological narrative.

Interestingly, both *One Thousand Gifts* and *The Broken Way* begin similarly in that they both reveal past darkness through which Voskamp proclaims, "Christ is redeeming everything" (269). She starts by exposing her personal weakness and openly addressing the audience in an effort to connect through the vulnerable content:

The day I cut up the inner softness of my arm with a shard of glass, the whole thick weight of hell's pressing against my chest [. . .] And I had stood, out on the back porch, all of sixteen, and let go of those glass jars. Dozens of them. I stood with broken glass shattered around my feet. No one could tell me how to get the dark, the fear, the ache, the hell out of me [. . .] Kneeling, I'd picked up one of the shards, dragged its sharp edge across my skin, relieved by the red line slowly seeping up, like you could drain yourself out of pain [. . .] Who doesn't know what it's like to smile thinly and say you're fine when you're not, when you're almost faint with pain? There isn't one of us not bearing the wounds from our own bloody battles. (12)

In this raw opening scene, Voskamp traces her narrative backwards from *One Thousand Gifts* to function as a starting point for the second book. Just as in *One Thousand Gifts* Aimee's death is the catalyst that awakens the author to her numbness towards God, the opening cutting scene in *The Broken Way* effectively introduces the book's underlying message that everyone carries the weight of his or her "unspoken broken" (15). With this subplot, Voskamp attempts to relate to an

audience that also shields shameful memories of their “unspoken pain” (14). Essentially, where *One Thousand Gifts* leaves off with the flight “home [a]nd into the heart of God,” (221) *The Broken Way* annotates the path “to let all my brokenness—be made into abundance” (31).

Yet, both books work together, based on the principles of narrative theology, to create a holistic spiritual message in the literary form of a continued memoir. For instance, in the opening of the second book, Voskamp reviews the previous journey from *One Thousand Gifts* and uses it as a stepping stone into “a story that might rejoin broken pieces” (28). Deviating from the present, she writes in past tense to ground her progressive story: “I had first read it slowly, years ago—how in the original language ‘gave thanks’ reads *eucharisteo*. The root word of *eucharisteo* is *charis*, meaning ‘grace.’ Jesus took the bread and saw it as grace and gave thanks” (31). Here Voskamp summarizes the foundation of her first book and transitions into the continued theme in the sequel:

If *eucharisteo* had been the first dare, the first journey of discovery into a life of letting God love me and counting all those ways, could this be a dare for the next leg of the journey, the way leading higher up and deeper in, daring me to let all the not-enough there in my open hands—let it be broken into more than enough? A dare to let all my brokenness—be made into abundance. *Break and give away. The broken way.* (31)

Building on the related principles in both books, Voskamp demonstrates the dynamic role of narrative theology in evangelical literature, for as the author grows, so too does her story. In classifying the branch of narrative theology identified as “my story,” Fackre also remarks that “narrative theology so conceived not only urges the telling of personal and social tales, but also proves autobiography and biography for their revelatory significance” (194). Although this

approach to Biblical storytelling can be effective, in Voskamp's writing, her interweaving personal experiences with Biblical narratives is often met with criticism that suggests her efforts are not communicated well. Yet at the very least, by connecting the related themes in her books, Voskamp shows that the Christian life is an ongoing process through an abiding walk with God.

Narrative Elements in Voskamp's Memoirs

Based on the forms of narrative theology, Voskamp's writing demonstrates key aspects of an artful memoir. Because Voskamp's writing centers on both theology and art, it is important to evaluate the two holistically to determine whether they effectively work together without distracting or overemphasizing one element over another. Through his own memoir, *My Bright Abyss*, poet Christian Wiman demonstrates the power of recounting a memorable event while ascribing meaning to it in the present. For example, in one paragraph, he succinctly captures a character's entire history, creates a setting, and conveys the driving conflict (15). Voskamp also, in her religious memoirs, does reflect similar practices in terms of narrative structure; however, where Wiman is primarily recognized for his poetic expertise, Voskamp instead incorporates poetic elements into a narrative with theological implications. In this example, she writes:

I was eighteen, with scars across my wrists, when I'd heard a pastor tell a whole congregation that he had once 'lived next to a loony bin.' I'd looked at the floor when everyone laughed. They didn't know how I had left my only mama behind the locked doors of the psychiatric wards more than a few times. When they laughed, I felt the blood drain away from my faces, and I'd wanted to stand up and howl, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.'(18)

In this passage, Voskamp reflects upon a memorable setting, provides piercing dialogue, exposes her emotions, and briefly explains a childhood experience without digressing into great detail. This method accomplishes the forward motion of the story while still providing important information to contribute to the author's objective in relaying this memory. Even in this short memory, Voskamp seasons her story with Scripture (Matt 9.12). She uses this narrative as a foundation for the exposition to follow: "I'd wanted to stand up and beg: *When the church isn't for the suffering and broken, then the church isn't for Christ*. Because Jesus, with His pierced side, is always on the side of the broken. Jesus always moves into places moved with grief" (18). This example of religious memoir further indicates the role of narrative theology to tell a story while proclaiming a spiritual message.

Another literary element of Voskamp's memoirs is her unique voice. Aside from the poetic language commonly associated with Voskamp, her writing voice portrays conviction through her words; it is this aspect that gives Voskamp the voice of both preacher and storyteller. In "The Art of Memoir," Stella Suberman discusses the necessity of consistency and credibility in an author's tone of voice. She writes, "Without sustaining voice, the narrator is a blank, his or her persona unrevealed, his or her 'take' on things unreliable" (12). Although a narrator's voice is commonly emphasized in other literary genres, Suberman attests to the importance of cultivating a unique voice to ground the memoir: "Just as in the novel, the reader wants to get comfortable with the narrator and to trust that narrator's persona to remain true" (12). Speaking to the credibility of the narrator's voice in *One Thousand Gifts*, Matthew Paul Turner argues that "Voskamp is a beautiful narrator, retelling painful, sometimes grief stricken moments with fearless vulnerability" (2). For example, while retelling the sorrowful stories of others, Voskamp

sincerely portrays the emotion in the second hand narratives and projects hope into their brokenness:

And in an empty pickup truck I hear voices scarred—the voices of people I have long loved and their voices cry pain and I honor them with the listening: When your memories haven an old man groping for your crotch, hot foul breath on your face, and your skin crawls? Give thanks? And an ultrasound screen stretches and you're sent home to wait for the uterine muscles to contract out the dead dreams? Or the woman you lay down with, shared the naked and unashamed, she beds another man, hands you back the wedding albums, and says she never knew love for you, what then? [. . .] The words sear. [. . .] In the wait, memories blister. And in the still, Spirit comes and He whispers a name. Christ. And I see a world through His lens: 'He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?' (Romans 8:32 NIV). (154)

In this case, Voskamp comes across with the vulnerable transparency of an authentic narrator. Although her vulnerability may have various effects on any given audience, through her expressive narratives, she presents a new, personal outlook on the Biblical message she seeks to explain.

In addition to her plot summaries and narrative voice, Voskamp also constructs supporting characters in her memoirs. Aside from herself and the presence of God as given characters in her works, Voskamp adds to the depth of her narratives by including family members and others that engage in the ongoing dialogue and movement of the storyline. Specifically in *One Thousand Gifts*, Voskamp coins individual names for each of her children

when introduced in the book. For example, without using his actual name, Voskamp refers to her husband as “The Farmer,” and herself as “The Farmer’s Wife” (53). She also titles some of her children throughout the book: “Boy-Man,” “Tall Girl,” “Little-One,” “Small-Son,” and “Tall-Son.” These titles, although seemingly impersonal, add to the narrator’s unique literary voice by providing literary descriptions of characters that contribute to the memoir. However, though the primary characters are few, “the narrator’s voice and reactions become even more important, for the reader is dependent on those alone for tension and suspense. In these cases the narrator’s feelings must move in some way” (Suberman 15). These characters personalize the memoir and provide insight into the author’s mindset and intimate relationships.

Though *One Thousand Gifts* is primarily centered around her immediate family and lacks many extended conversational scenes, *The Broken Way* incorporates more outside influences, as indicated through the nature of this work, to reach out into the community and impact others. Again in outlining what she believes to be essential components for a well-crafted memoir, Suberman notes the importance of “fully round[ed]” characters (14). She argues that of course these developed characters need to be realistic enough so that “the reader [can] know them so that his or her feelings would be engaged” (14). Voskamp achieves this effect in her ongoing dialogue with her friend Mei. In one of the final chapters of the book, Voskamp intertwines her own story with Mei’s through a written narrative of shared grief over sick children. She also includes the text messages used to communicate throughout their experiences in “[t]he club of the broken” (248). Through this prolonged subplot and character description at this point in the book, Voskamp develops Mei’s character throughout the dialogue exchange, which helps retain and focus the audience’s attention on the memorable aspects that the narrator emphasizes.

Not only does Voskamp demonstrate the voice, characters, and plot of a memoir, but she also grounds the action in local color. As the wife of a pig farmer, Voskamp is knowledgeable of rural, natural settings. Regarding the importance of setting, Suberman argues, “nothing better serves setting-needs than a place you are intimately acquainted with” (16). For example, while spending an uncertain night in the hospital with her recently diagnosed diabetic son, Voskamp allows the scenery around her to reflect her emotions, while connecting her experiences to the message of the gospel she has been explaining:

I look back out the window. It’s wide open out here, broken with no walls. And it’s terrifying. And it’s more beautiful than I could have ever known. The whole sky to the southwest opens like an ombre canvas to the heavens above glowing town lights blinking off in the falling snow. My heart tries to find words, form for the feelings. ‘Living given means that people will see the broken shards, the vulnerable edges of your given heart... and that means nothing less than radical humility and expansive trust. (258)

In this example, Voskamp illustrates the scenery to localize the story while also speaking her message through the imagery; this method demonstrates the harmonious relationship between storytelling and communicating meaning. Essentially, setting serves a dualistic role for Voskamp. Her descriptions provide a concrete backdrop for the scene and also reflect her sometimes emotional content. In this section, Voskamp shares her digital dialogue with Mei regarding brokenness becoming the key to effective communication in relationships. Though the imagery is brief in comparison to the previous segment, Voskamp mirrors the action of her surroundings: “I sit there holding her words in the open palm of my hand. The way to live with your one broken heart—is to give it away. What you need to give is your own brokenness. A car

out front turns a corner. How do you trust enough? How do you feel safe enough to trust enough? Mei's words unfold on the screen in my hand" (256). Here, Voskamp's description of the "car out front [that] turns a corner" (256) symbolizes her conversion to the practice of "the broken way." Even in this passage, Voskamp demonstrates the ways setting can mirror, foreshadow, and ground the action and emotion, thereby working to enhance and communicate the author's message.

Chapter Two: Orthodox Theology at the Center of Poetry

Poetry of the Psalms and the Puritans

Perhaps the most defining feature of Ann Voskamp's literary aesthetics is her poetic narrative style that conveys theological truth. Her technique of blending theological content with lyrical prose generates various reactions. For example, some like Lisa Whelchel recognize Voskamp as an author who "writes like a poet [with] the pen of a spiritual artist," while Rachel Marie Stone calls her "impressionistic style almost unreadable" ("Why"). These varied responses have led to many questions about Voskamp's orthodox theology. Interestingly, another critic links Voskamp's "ambiguity and pretty, poetic" style with her content and reasons that "she must answer to the way she misguides her readers into unbiblical, mystical, man-centered beliefs" (Womble). However, this controversy over doctrine and form provides an opportunity to study the implications of poetry in communicating theology.

A generalized background of religious literature is useful in understanding Voskamp's literary aesthetics. Her poetic voice contributes to the overarching message of her writing and hearkens back to the expressive literary nature of the book of Psalms. Though some take the form of a prayer or hymn, the predominant themes of anguish and worship among the Psalms are represented through poetic devices. From alliteration and metaphor to Hebrew rhyme scheme and imagery, the verses of the psalmists help communicate the heartfelt emotion of a dynamic relationship between man and his Creator. While discussing common literary themes in the psalms, Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, notes the profound impact that poetry has had on readers since its Hebrew origins:

Of all the books of the Bible in which poetry plays a role, Psalms is the one set of texts whose poetic status has been most strongly felt throughout the generations, regardless of the vagaries of transition, typographical arrangement of verses, and notions about biblical literary form. [. . .] In whatever way biblical versification was thought to work, it was almost universally assumed that the psalms exhibited the rhythmic regularity, the symmetries, the cadenced repetitions, of artful poems. (111)

According to this definition, the psalms serve many purposes in Scripture. One of these functions includes the ability of a psalm to capture doctrinal content in an expressive, relatable manner. Therefore, due to both their expressive, poetic nature and worshipful messages of hope and truth, the psalms enrich Scripture.

Additionally, the psalms enable readers to connect with the verses on a personal level. The very nature of this poetic Biblical literature is emotionally stirring and spiritually compelling. According Alter, “[. . .] if the Book of Psalms is poetry, it is quintessentially a ‘poetry of the heart,’ a spontaneous outpouring of feeling expressed with directness and simplicity, almost without intervention or artifice, its poignancy and universal appeal deriving from this very lack of artifice” (112). This emotional impact enables the psalms to convey urgent prophetic warnings and even songs of praise. In his commentary on Alter’s book, David Dussault writes, “It is the ‘fine recasting of the conventional’ that lends the individual psalms their power. Pregnant concepts and imagery, ‘the astonishing degree of information storage,’ expressed through poetic devices in the Psalms make them ‘an instrument for conveying densely patterned meanings, and sometimes contradictory meanings, that are not readily conveyable through other kinds of discourse’ (p. 113)” (“Some Implications” 11). The psalms in the Bible

convey powerful doctrine on a relatable, emotional level. Many psalms include prayerful, confessional, worshipful, and intercessory tones. The unique voice and style of the psalms have the ability to not only portray the vulnerability of the psalmist, but they also forge a connection with the audience through the emotional transaction.

In her literature, Ann Voskamp frequently parallels the poetic, emotional writing style associated with the Biblical psalms. Like many writers of the psalms, Voskamp takes to a creative format to bring her petition before God; she allows these confessional verses to lead her into discovering God's answers. Alter expounds on this emotional representation of faith:

The psalms are of course poems written out of deep and often passionate faith. What I am proposing is that the poetic medium made it possible to articulate the emotional freight, the moral consequences, the altered perception of the world that flowed from this monotheistic belief, in compact verbal structures that could in some instances seem simplicity itself. Psalms [. . .] often became an instrument for expressing in a collective voice (whether first person plural or singular) a distinctive, sometimes radically new, sense of time, space, history, creation, and the character of individual destiny. In keeping with this complex expressive purpose, many psalms, on scrutiny, prove to have a finely tensile semantic weave that one would not expect from the seeming conventionality of the language.

(114)

Resembling a poetic medium seen in the Psalms, Voskamp uses this format to present a petition to God and convey a message of truth and praise in response to His answers. For example, Voskamp implores God for help after asking for the power to extend compassion:

No one has to holler it too loud to me—sometimes the Spirit speaks the clearest in the quiet. He’s a wind and I’m a bell, rung with conviction. [. . .] Everyone’s passionate about changing the world, but who’s changing themselves to find compassion in their own world? God help me. Literally. *God. Help. Me.* When all else fails, those three words never fail. God. Help. Me. The song of the poor in spirit. He breaks in before I get to the refrain. He comes. (233)

The voice of her writing is strikingly personal and transparent. This type of writing lends itself to discovery. The tone is often pleading and striving to meet with God. It then conveys truth in this format by praising God for His answering.

In this passage, Voskamp considers her plea to God a “song of the poor in spirit” (233), which resembles one of the original purposes of the psalms—prayer through song. For instance, in Psalm 69, David petitions God for deliverance and salvation. Verses one through three begin, “Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul. I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me” (King James Version). While the chapter begins with desperately begging God for help, it ends in praise with the faith to believe that God will answer. The psalmist declares, “I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving” (30). The humble shall see this, and be glad: and your heart shall live that seek God. For the Lord heareth the poor, and despiseth not his prisoners” (32-33). In terms of tone, theme, and literary devices, such as first person point of view, this excerpt from Voskamp’s *The Broken Way* illustrates elements commonly associated with the psalms. However, it is important to note that while Voskamp’s work does have a characteristically poetic flair, it is not expressly poetry nor does it closely relate to the psalms with regard to divine inspiration. Yet the poetic language and form embedded in Voskamp’s

writing only renders her work more worthy of study in order to seek out the implications of poetically expressed theology.

In addition to resembling the form of the Psalms, Voskamp's literary aesthetics are somewhat similar to the Puritans' literary complexity. Separating themselves from the church and pioneering a new life in the early American colonies, the Puritans rigorously adhered to their faith. Naturally, their writing reflects their intense religious devotion. In *The American Puritans, Their Prose and Poetry*, Perry Miller recognizes that since they were surrounded by the threat of death, the Puritans often wrote about similar themes while using these situations "as an occasion for strengthening their faith and courage" (300). However, in addition to the solely spiritual content of their literature, the Puritans are often remembered for advocating doctrine through plain writing that contemporary audiences may now consider to be poetic. In the book, Miller draws attention to this writing style and people's reactions to it:

By that time [1721] the plain style in verse had become so prosaic that it invited such ridicule. But while the Puritans were cautious about yielding themselves to a style in which a play of words or conceits of wit distracted thought from the substance, nevertheless there is evidence that some of them had a hankering for 'metaphysical' poetry which they could not stifle, even though suspecting it to be sinful. (300)

The Puritan literary legacy emphasized plain, direct writing that did not distract from their theology; however, because of the changes in language, their writing is now often viewed as poetic in spite of Puritan efforts to maintain simplicity. Their dense language and weighty Biblical topics contribute to the controversy that surrounds their readability (Brow 4). Regardless

of their intentions, the Puritans contributed a foundation for religious literature that is still prevalent today, as evidenced through the predominance of prose writing on theological subjects.

One of the greatest controversies surrounding the Puritans literature and Ann Voskamp's writing is to what degree the theological message is compromised by a poetic approach. Interestingly, Ann Voskamp and the Puritan authors face similar criticism on the grounds of their linguistic readability and portrayal of orthodox doctrine. Throughout his article, "In Defense of the Puritans," Martin Brow addresses the argument that "reading the Puritans is a waste of time due to their antiquity" (2). He writes, "I concede without demur that both the language and style of the Puritan writers make it a formidable task to read them. But let it be added that theologians even of our own day are liable to the accusation that their language and style make them unreadable" (2). Although Brow acknowledges that the intended plain style of the Puritans can prove difficult to some readers, he also affirms that the artfulness of their language deserves further study:

Occasionally the linguistic style of the Puritans renders them difficult reading. But I do not accept the charge that this makes studying them a waste of time. Were it so, then we could likewise dispense with theological literature altogether, contemporary authors included. If we desire gold, then we must be prepared to dig for it. It is not found lying on the ground for all and sundry to collect without any effort or labor. The occasional stiffness and antiquity in Puritan literature does not call for our rejection of it, but rather for diligence and application in reading it. Of course, this is contrary to that spirit of our age which looks always for the instant and automatic. But Christians (and especially those engaged in

theological study) ought to be prepared to use that reason and intellect with which God has endowed them! (2-3)

With this reply, Brow rightly asserts that the nature of Puritan writing requires more of the reader. Because of its rich meaning and intricate wording, the artfulness of the text deserves to be carefully studied and analyzed. This passage confirms the idea that literary aesthetics includes a holistic evaluation of both form and content.

Much like the critics of Puritan literary aesthetics, Voskamp's critics often argue that her poetic voice and creative diction distract from the religious message of her writing. Some accusations are strikingly similar to the charges against Puritan literature. For example, in her *Christianity Today* article, Rachel Marie Stone holds the opinion that a writer is not free to break grammatical rules for the sake of aesthetic appeal, particularly in a book length format. She believes that specifically, the creative, poetic qualities of Voskamp's work render her writing unclear and "distracting" ("Why Gratitude"):

Further, at the risk of sounding exactly like the former English teacher that I am, I found Voskamp's ungrammatical, free associative, and impressionistic style almost unreadable. Any lover of words knows that the rules of language are by no means unbreakable. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the English poet who, like Voskamp, wrote about God's grandeur displayed in the ordinary, broke rules all the time: 'the just man justices;/Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;/Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—Christ.' But Hopkins was restrained in his trespasses and put them sparingly into poems, not books. All 240 pages of Voskamp's book feature adjectives in place of adverbs, tack adjectives on after nouns, overuse the passive voice ("pages of the gratitude journal fill

endlessly"), and seem to have an odd aversion to possessive pronouns: "the hand" and "the eye" when she means her hand, her eye. The overall effect was to me distracting and confusing rather than poetic. It's written entirely in the present tense, apparently to drive home one of her main points: that the present is where God is. ("Why Gratitude")

Although she claims to appreciate artful writing and does approve of Christian poetry that works well, Stone finds Voskamp's technique inferior in this regard. It has been said that in order for a writer to break the rules of language, he or she must first know them. In this case, Voskamp clearly displays her understanding of the English language in order to creatively communicate through creative diction and descriptive imagery. However, how Stone distinguishes between Hopkins's grammatical rule breaking "trespasses" and Voskamp's "unreadable" literary flaws is very insightful. She mentions that Hopkins structured his creativity "sparingly into poems, not books" ("Why Gratitude") unlike Voskamp. This statement suggests that traditionally, evangelical Christianity may be hesitant to accept poetically explicated religious literature. For instance, Molly Worthen, in *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelism*, traces the impoverished Christian imagination historically among the students at Wheaton College where C.S. Lewis' work played an influential role in securing a more balanced approach to art and theology (119). Worthen notes that Christian art often lacks poetic imagination, which can be attributed to the misguided understanding evangelicals have when confronting their fear that artful, creative expression will undermine or compromise the spiritual message of their work. Additionally, Worthen references A.W. Tozer who also "lamented the state of evangelical literature and complained that [. . .] 'we have developed a [. . .] mind unable to think abstractly'" (294). Rarely have Christian authors consistently combined prose with a

poetic voice while centering their writing on theology. Additionally, Stone's remark also implies that breaking the rules of language to fit the context of poetry is tolerable, which is essentially what Voskamp seeks to do through her poetically appealing book length prose. However, Stone's observation suggests that while she recognizes poetry can have a place in religious writing, she fails to see Voskamp's poetic efforts as effective, good literature.

In response to the accusations against the Puritan style of writing, Martin Brow draws an indirect comparison to Voskamp's literary form as well. He does recognize that certain "academic and scholarly works" (2) from the Puritans demand careful interpretation because of their "meaty" language and complex content. However, Brow also provides excerpts to show how "the language, although not twentieth-century, is by no means incomprehensible: 'But believers are freed from the law as a covenant of life and death. Therefore they are free from the curses and maledictions of the law. The law has nothing to do with them as touching their eternal state and condition. Were you indeed under the law as a covenant, condemnation would meet you, nothing else but condemnation (p 30)'" (2). Following this example, Brow compares another passage's alleged (un)readability and concludes that while there are differences in style, simply because some forms of literature require more concentration does not make them any less valuable or possibly any less effective. He writes, "Hard work they may be, but the Puritans cannot be called a waste of time. Their message, in the main, is relevant; any who wish to enjoy it, however, must be prepared to sweat for it" (4). Though centuries and worlds apart, the Puritan implications are fitting for an understanding of Voskamp's literary aesthetics, particularly for those who are unable to work towards comprehending her writing and argue against its readability as a result.

Similar to accusations against the Puritans, Voskamp's critics frequently state that her wording and grammatical structure takes away from her content. In her review of *The Broken Way*, one critic in particular, Rebekah Womble, analyzes the issues commonly associated with Voskamp's readability and cites examples from the text. On the homepage of her website, she outlines her basis for critiquing literature: "Wheat, or Chaff? Anyone can write a book for women. But only God wrote the *perfect* one. The others need to be tested against His Word. Some are wheat. Many are chaff. *Know the difference*" (Womble). While reviewing Voskamp's work under a heading entitled, "Foggy Language And The Issue Of Purposeful Ambiguity," she also writes, "Reading, studying, unraveling this book was much more difficult than I expected, and the biggest reason for my trouble was the way Voskamp writes" (Womble). Additionally, this critic hints at the inseparable relationship between form and content, which applies directly to Voskamp's controversial literary aesthetics:

I wouldn't ordinarily criticize a writer based on sheer opinion and taste. But sometimes—sometimes—the author's language can actually serve to mislead and harm the reader. I honestly believe that is the case in *The Broken Way*.

Throughout the book, Voskamp writes in such an ethereal, lofty, and metaphorical way that it leaves the reader hanging in the middle of the air, unable to find a solid ground of meaning. 'What is she actually trying to say?' was the constant refrain in my mind, as I grappled with her statements. (Womble)

For Womble, statements such as "The only way to abundant life is the broken way of risk" (115) are unclear and even within the context of the chapter, still do not clarify the author's meaning. She writes, "Unfortunately, context didn't help me, as Voskamp rarely explains her confusing one-sentence platitudes. They are left up to our own interpretation, and when we think we've

figured it out, it's often with the awareness that another reader could easily take the same language and make it fit an entirely different meaning" (Womble). However, this specific "confusing one-sentence platitude" results from a discussion about the vulnerability of sharing personal weakness with others. Voskamp asks the question that leads her to the one-sentence reply: "What if you risk breaking open your own vulnerable need, risk exposing your own broken places needing to be touched by love—and your brokenness is left exposed and unfulfilled?" (115). In this passage, Voskamp builds up to this "ambiguous language" by asking a series of questions. These questions reflect Voskamp's mindset at the time she uncovers the meaning of living brokenly. For instance, she admits, "I want to ask [my father] what's pounding through my veins. What if you break open your one heart and risk pouring out your one life in givenness and you aren't received as being enough to actually be loved back?" (113-14). This technique resembles a journaling or stream of consciousness process where Voskamp outlines the events leading up to her discovery that "[t]hat this vulnerable communion is a risk [*koinonia*]" and "we're all worth the risk of any brokenness" (115). Therefore, within the context of the passage, the wording fits the message. However, even despite the clear contextual explanation, part of Voskamp's signature style is her ability to relate to readers of diverse experiences. This alleged "purposeful ambiguity" may indeed serve to draw readers who can respond differently to the same "one-sentence platitudes" by being led instead to the biblical passage it references. In this way, the loose, poetically structured language can in fact contribute to the content in question.

Much like the accusations against Voskamp using creative language to relay orthodoxy, Puritan opponents ground their allegations in the Puritans' alleged misuse of Biblical doctrine. For Voskamp, this creative language includes intentionally breaking the barriers of grammatical

syntax to poetically relay theology; her nuanced literary insight contributes to her insightful application of doctrine. More specifically regarding Puritan literature, Brow recognizes that some believe Puritan theology is no longer relevant. They believe that as culture progresses, doctrine should also conform to the needs and advances of the society (3). However, Brow suggests, “Today's Evangelicalism is so often purely cerebral. We lack a deep and solid spirituality. The Puritans, by and large, knew no such lack” (3). In the same vein, he also confronts the notion that Puritan theology is “dangerous” to those who misuse their literature. Surprisingly, he agrees, “Of course they are dangerous. But that does not mean to say that we do not or must not read them. After all, modern theologians are also dangerous, and perhaps it is not unfair to say that their lack of a strict biblical basis makes them even more so than the Puritans. Danger should result in a care not to abuse, rather than a rejection of that which is dangerous” (4). Here, Brow objectively identifies the potential shortcomings in Puritan literature but proposes evaluating their form and content while discerning the context surrounding the writing's publication. This approach focuses on a balanced view of the literary aesthetics of a particular work.

Although there are remarkable similarities between criticisms of Puritan literature and Voskamp's, it is important to note the key differences. While Voskamp is accused of being unreadable due to her loose grammar and questionable doctrine, on the contrary, Puritan literature may be considered difficult because of its substantial grammar and rich meaning. However, both Puritan literature and Voskamp's work center on portraying theology in such a way that arrests readers and compels them to Christ. Tracing Voskamp's literary criticism back to the Puritans also shows the advancements in the legacy of Christian literature and the persistent debate over what can be regarded as effective, artful Christian literature.

Nevertheless, these comparisons are useful in evaluating the literary aesthetics of complex works despite their doctrinal and linguistic accusations.

Doctrine

Aside from their disapproval of Voskamp's writing style, several critics express concern over her treatment of orthodox theology. For instance, in his unfavorable book review, Tim Challies cautions (and later, in an apology to Voskamp) explains why he "would not recommend it" ("*One Thousand Gifts*"). He writes, "Though *One Thousand Gifts* is not without some strengths, in its own subtle way I believe that it can and will prove dangerous, at least to some" (Challies). Regarding the impact of her interpretation of Scripture, he continues, "I fear that some will see that Voskamp subtly promotes a higher order of holiness, a higher order of relationship with God, and be dissatisfied that they do not have this for themselves. They may grow discontent not with their ingratitude but with their inability to experience the kind of ecstasy and fervor Voskamp models. What she finds, what she models, is absent from the Bible" (Challies). Challies is not alone in cautioning that Voskamp's writing may prove hazardous in leading to unorthodoxy (much like the accusations against Puritan theology.) In her review of Voskamp's second book, Womble also asserts, "I believe *The Broken Way* contains some dangerous, deceptive teachings that women should avoid at all costs. For that reason, I rate it CHAFF" (*Wise in His Eyes*). These reactions reflect the controversy surrounding Voskamp's doctrine and parallel the accusations against the integrity of Puritan theology such as their potential to be dangerous to an undiscerning reader. Womble also cautions, "Unsuspecting women are so captivated by her poetic imagery and poignant descriptions that they cannot discern the difference between truth and falsehood" (*Wise*). Again, Womble suggests the inseparability of form and content by stating the power of literary devices to potentially

overthrow the message. However, in more than a defense of Puritan literature, Brow suggests a scholarly approach to an author's interpretation of Biblical doctrine is vital to understanding and accurately evaluating both a message and a method. Such advice is applicable to reading writing like Voskamp's as well:

Perhaps at the bottom of all the dangers lies this one foundational error of coming to the Puritans with a lack of a proper critical approach. Because the Puritans are often recommended for their soundness in the faith, the undiscerning reader can begin to read them without allowing for the fact that he is reading the works of men. The Puritans like ourselves were prone to error. So it is important that we come to the Puritans with our critical faculties sharpened, and our minds prepared to test what we read by Scripture. If we do this, we will avoid falling victim to any serious danger. Care also needs to be taken to put what we are reading into its proper historical context. By failing to do this, we may fail to understand what we have read, for without due attention to historical context we will distance ourselves from an easy grasp of what a particular author is saying. This is of crucial importance when we read works which were written during times of theological debate, although it is not so crucial when we are reading noncontroversial material. (4)

With this approach to controversial literature, Brow stresses the importance of critical context when evaluating literature as a Biblical scholar. He claims that historical context is crucial to understanding the intent of the Puritans in their religious literature. In the same way, being receptive to an author like Ann Voskamp requires the same amount of insight into the cultural and literary context of the writing. For instance, Voskamp knowingly writes to a largely female

audience of various denominational preferences. When viewed in this light, it is clear that typically Voskamp metaphorically portrays the orthodox theology she claims to believe.

According to Voskamp, orthodox doctrine is more than a creed of beliefs; instead, it is a practical way of life. Based on the concept of “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,” (John 1.14) Voskamp emphasizes the importance of putting her words to life through her actions. When practicing gratitude for both blessings and trials, Voskamp writes, “The theology’s putting on skin” (179). Additionally, in her personal introduction on her blog page, Voskamp writes, “I believe there is more than believing. There is living what I believe” (“Meet”). As evidence of her lifestyle of faith, others attest to her authenticity as a believer and writer of Christian themes. In her article containing excerpts from her interview with Ann and colleagues, Katelyn Beaty quotes the cofounder of an international nonprofit organization as saying, “Ann sees people . . . which means Ann is a ‘social issues’ writer [. . .] She always says she doesn’t believe in ‘compassion fatigue.’ Her life backs that up” (“How”). This illustration indicates that Voskamp’s writing results from personal belief and application. Confirming this idea, others note that in her books, the religion she advocates “isn’t her theory; it’s her heartbeat” (Chandler).

Despite this reputation, still some critics argue that rather than undergirding her evangelistic focus, Voskamp’s humanitarian efforts usurp the power of the gospel in her writing. For example, while discussing the blessing of giving to others in spite of crippling brokenness, Voskamp tells the story of how together with her family, she surprised members of the community with thoughtful gifts and selfless gestures, such as paying for a family’s dinner and providing nurses with chocolate (69,75) . However, one critic argues that instead of providing an example of faith through works, (James 2.17) this section in *The Broken Way* lacks a clear presentation of “sharing the gospel or inviting people to church. And [Voskamp] seems to forget

the teaching from Christ that we shouldn't boast about our giving [Matt.6:2-3]" (Womble). Despite the claims that the Voskamps brag about being "humanitarian superheroes" (Womble) while overlooking the importance of spreading the Gospel instead of candy and smiles, throughout her writing Voskamp addresses the necessity of sharing the Gospel. In fact, her humanitarian examples further support her message of the Gospel in action. For instance, in *One Thousand Gifts*, Voskamp tells of an encounter with a homeless man while on her way with the youth group to minister at the local mission. Throughout this section, Voskamp mentions that group's goal is "to bless Christ in the other. A night not walking wide of the crumpled hurt, not looking the other way like we normally do, not a night about us and our agenda and getting to where we're going because isn't the place we always really want to go to, the place of seeing God?" (185). She also mentions that in their conversation with the homeless man, they read Scripture and someone "from [their] group calls softly after: 'Jesus loves you...'" (187). Because Voskamp blends her memoir with theology, at times, the narrative may take precedence in order to establish a foundation for doctrinal application. But since her work is not necessarily centrally evangelistic but rather serves a dual purpose, her narratives do not undermine the message of her writing. Regardless, in this case, while Womble rightly asserts that humanitarian efforts are incomplete without evangelism, she neglects passages where Voskamp clearly integrates meeting the physical needs of others with spreading the gospel.

As a standard for the theology in her work, Voskamp openly claims to adhere to a biblical statement of orthodox faith. On her webpage, Voskamp outlines her beliefs, and throughout her writing, she affirms her religious position by grounding her stories in the Bible. Regarding the tenets of her faith, Voskamp confesses, "I believe in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed and our fellowship's statement of faith. We're just simple, farming folk,

worshipping in a Brethren Bible Chapel, and are non-denominational, evangelical (believing in the necessity of salvation in Christ), Bible believing (embracing the Bible as God’s infallible and complete message to all people) and grace-clinging” (“Meet”). Additionally, in her trademark poetic manner, she also reveals her commitment to the virgin birth, Trinity, “infallibility of the Bible, God’s Word”, and sacrificial death of Christ (“Meet”). Voskamp builds upon the fundamentals of the Christian faith in her writing and “fight[s] back the dark with doxology” (135).

Despite Voskamp’s professions of faith, many still doubt the orthodoxy of her theology. In particular, on her blog, Womble goes so far as to say that “even an unbeliever could agree with the vast majority of the book,” which she finds “frightening” (“*The Broken Way*”). Womble argues that while Voskamp does use Scripture throughout her books, her general ideas of morality and religion lack clear Scriptural accuracy: “They are not rooted in Scripture, but in her own thoughts as she dwells on various experiences and relationships in her personal life” (Womble). While most of Voskamp’s audience would insist that Scripture is the final authority, how they approach biblical hermeneutics differs, which again speaks to the “crisis of authority” (Worthen) that plagues contemporary Christianity. Nevertheless, the foundation for Voskamp’s books rest in the theology of the cross of Christ as she explains through the word “cruciform.” Additionally, Voskamp’s humanitarian examples are simply illustrations that contribute to her overall message—the “broken way” of Christ means becoming “[b]roken and given, reaching right out” to others (63). Certainly, many moral unbelievers may agree with the fact that “every act of kindness” has the potential to “go to the ends of the earth and change the world,” (73); however, Voskamp advocates gift giving, for example, as an extension of the work of Christ in her life, which will connect more closely with a Christian audience (157). Rather than spreading

“bad theology,” (Womble), Voskamp instead connects her active faith with Bible verses: “[T]he Farmer says the verses quietly: ‘If you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed... And I turn in the shade of the old maples lining the hospital parking lot and join him: ‘...then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday’ [Isaiah 58.10]” (76). Although Voskamp may not have overtly stated her evangelistic motivations for the humanitarian deeds, ultimately her goodwill gestures are implicit in the doctrine of salvation, mostly directed towards a Christian audience, and offer applications for a life that honors Christ.

Not only is Voskamp’s doctrine discredited because of its supposed humanist ideologies, but critics also associate her teaching with elements of panentheism and mysticism. In his book review, Tim Challies echoes the concerns of other critics regarding pagan theology in *One Thousand Gifts*. He explains, “Her theology is an eclectic combination of Protestantism and Catholic or Catholic-influenced mysticism,” which “promotes the view that God can be experienced, and perhaps even best experienced, outside of Scripture. This comes in direct contrast to what Scripture itself says, that Scripture is God’s final and sufficient revelation of himself” (Challies). While Scripture certainly is the final authority on God’s revelation, the Bible also says that God has left his Holy Spirit in the world to guide His children in truth (Jn. 16. 13). Additionally, general revelation points to the fact that God is above all natural things yet still uses creation to testify of His presence on earth (Psalm 24.1). However, panentheism, included with mysticism, also relates to the idea that God manifests a saving presence in everything, including nature; this presence, of course, operates outside of the knowledge that Christ alone is the only way to heaven (Jn. 14.6). In his article, “Romantic Panentheism, a Review of *One Thousand Gifts* by Ann Voskamp,” Bob DeWaay recognizes the difference

between pantheism, which suggests “that God *is* everything,” and agrees that “Voskamp would likely recoil from the notion that she is promoting pagan nature religion or mysticism. But she does put Christians on the same footing as the pagans by taking them on a journey with her to find God in nature and art” (*Lighthouse*). He cites the passage where Voskamp explains how her majestic encounter with a full moon draws her into a presence of God (109). He argues that “Voskamp’s pantheism is not compatible with Christian theism, which [. . .] spills into universalism as it does in Emergent and the New Age. It colors everything she teaches” (DeWaay). However, perhaps anticipating conflicted reactions, Voskamp herself distinguishes between nature worship and humbly glorifying God through His creation:

Is worship why I’ve run for the moon? Not for lunar worship, but for True Beauty worship, worship of Creator Beauty Himself. God is present in all moment, but I do not deify the wind in the pines, the snow falling on the hemlocks, the moon over harvested what. Pantheism, seeing the natural world as divine, is a very different thing than seeing divine God present in all things. I know it here kneeling, the twilight so still: nature is not God but God revealing the weight of Himself, all His glory, through the looking glass of nature. I had told it once to a questioning son that theology is but that born of *theos* and *logy*—God and study—and theology is to study God. I had always thought of the hefty concordances on the high shelf in the study, but isn’t this, too, the deep study of the Spirit of God? The revelation of God over the farm?” (110)

While Voskamp clearly recognizes and differentiates her worshipful experience from a pantheistic philosophy, DeWaay still believes that her doctrine of the presence of God in all

things is misguided. However, Voskamp's awareness of the presence of God is the catalyst to her discovery of the character of God:

Make every moment a cathedral giving glory... I am Jacob and the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it (Genesis 28:16) [. . .] Time, what God first deemed holy above all else (Genesis 2:3). Thank God for the time, and very God enters that time, presence hallowing it [. . .] But there's more. I awake to I AM here. When I'm present, I meet I AM, the very presence of a present God. In His embrace, time loses all sense of speed and stress and space and stands so still and... holy. Here is the only place I can love Him. (70)

As a response to this doctrinal critique, Voskamp supports her findings with Scripture on the basis that God has a history of revealing Himself to His people in unexpected places; her foundation for believing in awareness of the presence of God then both in and outside of Scripture is Biblical. Based on the idea that God's redeeming presence intentionally abides in the world, Alexander Schmemmann in *For the Life of the World* discusses this sacramental presence. He notes, "In the Bible the food that man eats, the world of which he must partake in order to live, is given to him by God, and it is given as *communion with God*" (14). Additionally, Boersma also acknowledges, "By treating the world as a Eucharistic offering in Christ, received *from* God and offered *to* him, we are drawn into God's presence [. . .] The purpose of all of matter, [. . .] is to lead us into God's heavenly presence, to bring about communion with God, participation in the divine life" (8-9). The Christian faith works out of an understanding that while God is above His creation, He also communicates with His children through their personal experiences, thus contributing to their spiritual growth (Jer. 23.23-4). Here both Schmemmann and Boersma indirectly point to the impoverished sense of Christian imagination among

evangelicals; this lack of understanding inhibits an audience's ability to interact with the Scriptures and as an extension, Christian literature. In *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer also references how recognizing the sacramental presence of God in the world is vital to a Christian's abiding relationship with the Creator:

Over against all this cloudy vagueness stands the clear scriptural doctrine that God can be known in personal experience. A loving Personality dominates the Bible, walking among the trees of the garden and breathing fragrance over every scene. Always a living Person is present, speaking, pleading, loving, working, and manifesting Himself whenever and wherever His people have the receptivity necessary to receive the manifestation [. . .] What can all this mean except that we have in our hearts organs by means of which we can know God as certainly as we know material things through our familiar five senses? We apprehend the physical world by exercising the faculties given us for that purpose, and we possess spiritual faculties by means of which we can know God and the spiritual world if we will obey the Spirit's urge and begin to use them. (48- 49)

Essentially, Voskamp describes memorable encounters in the presence of God that she does not claim to have redeemed her from her sins; rather, she explains the implications of these moments as a renewed dedication in the continual process of sanctification.

Another example from Voskamp's works confirms the complex relationship between her theological content in poetic form. In "Done with God," from the blog posts in *The (Brutally) Honest Psalms Series*, Voskamp mirrors a song of David by presenting her cry before God and asking Him for answers to His silence in response to the evils of the world. Continuing with her controversial doctrine of the presence of God in *One Thousand Gifts*, Voskamp responds to her

questions with the knowledge that God is already there. In psalm-like fashion, she writes, “God is in you, the redeemed and the claimed and the named, God is in you, always rising and raising you up again [. . .] He’s fighting for you, so you can be still. He’s going right before you, always making a way. He’s carrying you, so you can lean into the strength of the Universe” (“Done”). Because of the capitalized “Universe,” some critics confirm that Voskamp advocates a panentheistic worldview. The nature of this criticism suggests that at times, Voskamp’s aesthetic approach to theology lends itself to hermeneutical confusion. Although many critics recognize that she clearly references Scripture in her works, her interpretation can be miscommunicated through an ineffective measure in her poetic narrative.

However, in other excerpts from her work, Voskamp distinguishes between the created world and the God of the universe, which suggests this capitalization provides merely an aesthetic appeal. In *One Thousand Gifts*, Voskamp writes, “And He soothes His own restless child in arms with the whisper, law of the universe that He’s writing deep into this heart: Eucharisteo *always precedes the miracle, child*” (160). Here, Voskamp illustrates the God’s connection to His children and presence in the world, but she does not suggest that God is one with the created world. In the context of the blog post, Voskamp explores the reality of the presence of God quietly at work within unlikely places: “the brazen rising of the sun” and “in the rising from the ashes” (“Done”). Voskamp links these descriptions to websites that list corresponding verses. In this way, she centers her exposition in Scripture verses that show the foundation of her message. The context of “leaning into the Universe” comes from the Biblical promise that God will bear the surrendered burdens of the afflicted. By patterning her writing style after the psalms of David and connecting her message to Scripture, clearly Voskamp does not promote a pagan philosophy.

Perhaps the most critical aspect of analyzing Voskamp's doctrine is recognizing the context of the writing for evangelical Christians and how the form contributes to the literary aesthetics. When taken out of context, certain passages may appear contrary to Scripture. However, when taking into consideration Voskamp's statement of faith and her consistency in referencing the Bible to support her theology, it is evident that her writing seeks to convey spiritual truth. Regarding *One Thousand Gifts*, Lisa Welchel affirms that Voskamp's doctrine can best be studied in context with her writing style. She comments, "Where do I begin? Do I tell you that Ann Voskamp writes like a poet with the heart of a mystic? Or do I share with you how *One Thousand Gifts* is so profound that if we internalize this message of lifestyle gratitude and all-pervasive grace, we can know Christ like Adam knew Eve. To write of such beautiful, intimate union requires the pen of a spiritual artist. Open this book, then open your heart" (Welchel). In this segment, Welchel captures the mindset needed to critically evaluate what Voskamp teaches and the way she expresses her message. She hints that mysticism is one point of criticism in Voskamp's writing, yet she acknowledges that the form of the writing lends itself to a possible mystical interpretation. Nevertheless, Welchel reveals the writing's potential to deepen the Christian's knowledge of God. Essentially, to understand Voskamp is to appreciate theology in a poetic context; however, despite their professed understanding of poetic theology, still many critics argue that while poetry can have a powerful role in communicating Scripture, Voskamp's attempts at such art are at times deficient and ineffective.

Poetry as a Medium for Theology

Clearly, the most distinguishing characteristic of Ann Voskamp's work is her poetic approach to presenting theology. Although she faces severe criticism for her writing style, her method of Biblical exposition is potentially revolutionary for contemporary evangelical Christian

literature. In fact, merging theology with poetry is a continuing debate among evangelical culture. Authors, scholars, poets, and preachers have contributed to this controversial discussion without necessarily agreeing on the most effective way to communicate Christian theology. However, through her influence as a writer, Voskamp illustrates an artful technique that combines the doctrine of Scripture with creative expression in a way that compels Christians to explore the Gospel as a form of poetry.

Partly because religious literature is typically dominated by prescriptive prose, Christians in the church have become calloused to the formative literary qualities of Scripture. In *Finally Comes the Poet*, Walter Brueggemann calls the remedy for this condition, “Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World” (1). Through this book, he focuses on preachers of evangelical churches who, through their sermons, can become poets and interchangeably prophets, meaning those who powerfully speak truth in innovative ways to revive the doctrine Christians have grown accustomed to. (5). His principles for awakening the faith can be equally applied to writers with a poetic bent. He describes the condition of the lifeless church in this way:

The preacher in the U.S. culture deals with a claim that is commonly accepted as truth by the listeners. That is, we preach mostly to believers. [. . .] The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed. We depart having heard, but without noticing the urge to transformation that is not readily compatible with our comfortable believing that asks little and receives less. The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane. (1)

Brueggemann's observations of the evangelical church are also supported by others, such as Molly Worthen in her work on the "the crisis of authority in American evangelicalism." While discussing Christian thought on university campuses, Worthen cites Clyde Kilby who championed C.S. Lewis's philosophy of art and the Bible. Kilby explained the struggle young evangelicals faced in accepting the "the divine inspiration of only the content of the Bible, rather than its poetic forms" (qtd. in Worthen 121). Through this excerpt, both Worthen and Kilby note that fear of distracting from the message of the Biblical text causes Christians to neglect the poetic style of sections of the Bible, which produces "a simplicity which diminishes" (121). The result is a decline in the quality of Christian art that successfully conveys truth while presenting beauty; this lack of artfulness also contributes to an impoverished sense of a Biblical imagination.

While debating whether poetry compromises theological doctrine, critics recognize factors that contribute to the misunderstanding as well as the limits of creativity. In the preface to Kilby's "The Christian and the Arts," William Dyrness references the conflict in Christian circles over the place of aesthetics. Because of their understanding of the doctrine and "sin and grace, [. . .] Protestants [tend] to focus less on beauty as the final orientation of aesthetics and more on a holistic understanding of life lived [. . .] Indeed, Kilby resonates with these writers when he connects grace and gracefulness. Further thought might lead one to seeing art and aesthetics as grounded directly in the Trinitarian life of God as this is displayed in creation and redemptive history" (8). This section acknowledges the need for aesthetically appealing art as a reflection of theology. Although poetry can be used to enhance a Christian's understanding of Scripture, it is important to find the balance between what Malcom Guite calls "idolatry" and spiritual enlightenment. In *Faith, Hope and Poetry*, Guite analyzes the role of poetry in

explaining doctrine. He cautions, “In offering a theology of imagination, we need to have some criteria for discerning the ways in which imagination might both lapse into idolatry and unhelpful fantasy, and yet also give us our only possible apprehensions of the Kingdom of God” (13). Certainly, there are restrictions to using poetry as a platform for theology; however, understanding the relationship between the two will help preserve their authenticity.

Although there are concerns with incorporating art and the Bible, when used appropriately, poetry can effectively communicate doctrinal complexities. While poetry is found throughout the Bible and shares a strategic relationship with theology, it is important to distinguish their individual roles. In his essay, “Is Theology Poetry?” C.S. Lewis identifies the differences and compatibility between theology and poetic form. He defines theology as, “the systematic series of statements about God and about man’s relation to Him which the believers of a religion make” (116). His definition of poetry connects to Guite’s focus on the theological imagination. Lewis explains poetry “simply as writing which arouses and in part satisfies the imagination” (117). Lewis also explores poetry’s ability to convey truth and beauty. Regarding their valuable relationship, Lewis agrees that “[t]heology certainly shares with poetry the use of metaphorical or symbolical language” (130). This discovery is crucial in understanding the impact poetry can have in explaining and enlightening Biblical doctrine. Through shared symbolic language, poetry and theology may revive Christians from “dread dullness” that results from being “beaten by prose” (Brueggemann 9).

Recognizing the need for renewal within Christian faith and literature, Brueggemann calls upon a poet who will function as a preacher in declaring renewed life into timeless truth. He believes this “artist” will “render the text in quite fresh ways, so that the text breaks life open among the baptized as it never has before” (9). His description of this preacher-poet has

profound implications for Voskamp's poetic theology. He ascribes the role of poetry and prophecy to a writer or speaker that awakens the slumbering with the power of the gospel:

Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism, the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the name preaching. [. . .] The preacher has an awesome opportunity to offer an evangelical world: an existence shaped by the news of the gospel. This offer requires special care for words, because the baptized community awaits speech in order to be a faithful people.[. . .] the peculiar role of dramatic, poetic communication, [is] the very kind given us in the text of the Bible. [. . .] Because we live so close to the biblical text, we often fail to note its generative power to summon and evoke new life. Broadly constructed, the language of the biblical text is prophetic: it anticipates and summons realities that live beyond the conventions of our day-to-day, take-for-granted world. [. . .] Our preferred language is to call such speech prophetic, but we might also term it poetic. [. . .] The poet/prophet is a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibility in the listening assembly. Preaching continues that dangerous, indispensable habit of speech. The poetic speech of text and of sermon is a prophetic construal of a world beyond the one taken for granted. (4-5)

With the responsibility to preach God's Word as prophecy and poetry, this artist has tremendous power to influence Christianity with the life giving truth of the Gospel in a way that shakes off complacency of "prose" (5). This type of writing provides a fresh perspective to revisited Scripture. Additionally, A.W. Tozer explores the origination of a Biblical prophet and connects the idea to the church that is devoid of such compelling expressions of God's Presence among believers:

They were prophets, not scribes, for the scribe tells us what he has read, and the prophet tells what he has seen. The distinction is not an imaginary one. Between the scribe who has read and the prophet who has seen there is a difference as wide as the sea. We are overrun today with orthodox scribes, but the prophets, where are they? The hard voice of the scribe sounds over evangelicalism, but the Church waits for the tender voice of the saint who has penetrate the veil and has gazed with inward eye upon the wonder that is God. And yet, thus to be penetrate, to push in sensitive living experience into the holy Presence, is a privilege open to every child of God. (40-41)

In this passage, Tozer affirms Brueggemann's call for a poetic prophet to demonstrate that an intimate personal experience with Christ is available to all believers.

Concerning the current climate of Christianity, Voskamp's writing has engaged many in a conversation about the relevancy and readability of Scripture. For example, Mark Buchannan recognizes Voskamp's role as a "poet/prophet" that Brueggemann describes: "As I read *One Thousand Gifts*, I kept thinking of Walt Whitman's haunting phrase, 'Finally shall come the poet.' It's a rare gift that can render both life's everyday intimacies and the heart's broken rhythms in language at once lucid and lyrical, but Ann does it without seeming to try. And most of all, best of all, she employs that language to tell a story of a life—her own—transformed by the simple act of giving thanks. Finally comes the poet" (1). Even with critical reactions to her style and content, Voskamp seeks to refine an already established craft that combines poetic elements with prophetic themes.

Although Voskamp is frequently charged with being unreadable, her complex language and intentional grammatical subversions reinforce the message of her writing by requiring a

close reading. The poetry throughout the Bible illustrates a God given resource to express individuality and point others to a knowledge of Himself. In his book, Guite comments on the benefits of using poetry, particularly when communicating theology. Since poetry is intricately detailed and at times abstract, it can be less direct than prose; however this imaginative language does not lack clarity, but rather it communicates clarity through uncommon comparisons. On this subject, Guite writes that “rich imagery demands a slow and succulent reading, a *tasting* of the words as they flow, and this celebration of the very words and sounds as good in themselves, this [is a] more engaged way of reading” (17). Furthermore, Guite argues that reading and understanding poetry has become somewhat of a lost art. He recognizes that poetry demands complete attention from its reader and promises to be a rewarding process of discovery: “First, we need to recover slowness, to savor and celebrate the text itself. We need to appreciate the surface, shape and appearance of the words, ‘tasting’ their sounds. Sometimes the very music of the words compels [us]” (26). Given this basis for savoring poetry, Voskamp’s writing requires a considerable amount of slow reading through a mixture of prose and poetry. Voskamp acknowledges, “If language has a lyricism to it, then it slows us down. It causes us to engage the text differently, to think differently, to process at a deeper level. So you don’t have to be a poet to write poetically” (“3 Secrets”). For while her work does contain poetic elements, it is not explicitly poetry, and sometimes it is this very poetic exposition that causes critics considerable misunderstanding. Regardless, though Voskamp’s entire literary voice has a poetic appeal, occasionally, even in the midst of prose, she inserts lines of text in the form of a poem. This unique format calls greater attention to the message of the poem, which stands out from the rest of the page. For example, Voskamp writes, “You can find yourself under your own roof, looking at your own people, and your own mess of unspoken broken, and there it is like a light:

There's more abundance
 in daily giving your presence to one
 than daily diligence for the furtherance of hundreds" (233).

Voskamp insightfully introduces poetic form as the culmination of her message. Again, she includes it as a continuation of a lyrical song:

It's the broken hearts that find the haunting loveliness of a new beat—it's the
 broken hearts that live a song that echoes God's.

Beat, beloved heart, beat on in the world.

You will be broken and you will be loved.

You don't ever have to be afraid.

The way keeps opening up before us. And we'll let it come. (270)

Combining the form and language of poetry, Voskamp's work presents a hybrid of metaphorical and symbolic discourse. These complexities may prohibit some from seeing past the artful style of the writing. They may perceive this form as distracting rather than illuminating the depth beneath the surface.

While Voskamp's descriptive language encourages slower reading, her poetic devices also provide an outlet for exploring the doctrine of Christ. Looking to poetry as a means of explaining theology, Guite recognizes another benefit of merging religious content with poetic style. He says, for example, communicating the doctrine of "the dual nature of Christ" cannot be explained by "[r]eason alone," but rather, [i]t demands a more subtle and complex response. In fact only the imaginative arts—certainly poetry, but also painting and music—have come

anywhere close to embracing simultaneously both parts of the paradox and expressing the mystery adequately” (43). Indeed, Kilby also recognizes the power of poetry to “make theology clearer than through any other explanation” (15). When Voskamp conveys a doctrinal message, her language is fluid and expressive, breaking the boundaries of grammar, like words of a poem in the form of prose. Voskamp remembers to live “cruciform” by drawing a small ink cross on her wrist. In this passage, she explains the significance of this Bible based concept that Christians are called to “shed abroad” the love of God in their hearts (Rom. 5.5):

I reach for the pen on my nightstand, the way I’ve reached for ink to count a thousand ways He loves me, the way ink’s been the cheapest of medicines. But no—can the ink be lived, branded onto the skin, how could it leave the page and lead a way through pain? The ink would start right there on my scarred wrist, right where part of me wanted to kind of die, and not in the saving way, and somehow there is good brokenness that grows out of every scar and wound we will ever suffer. *Draw one line vertically down my wrist, right over scars.* The question of evil and suffering is answered in the breaking of God’s own heart too. *Draw another line horizontally across my wrist, breaking scar lines with cross lines.* Our broken hearts always break His. It’s the quantum physics of God: Your one broken heart always splits God’s heart in two. You never cry alone [. . .] Maybe air isn’t all that keeps you alive. There’s a cross that’s helping me breathe. It’s reminding me, re-forming me, and I’m so insufferably forgetful. I try to remember that grace swallowed with courage is elemental to living. Inked cross bleeding into arms. Swallow down His grace. [. . .] That cross on my wrist begs like a prayer: *Become cruciform. Like a cross. Transform.* It is true that to

become cruciform, to let your life become shaped like a cross, is to become more fully human—and most fully like Christ—then this is the work most urgent, most needed. (55-57)

By showing how she applies the Gospel to her daily life in this way, Voskamp reveals the relevancy of the Bible. Through her descriptive language and confessional tone, Voskamp also personalizes the truth she discusses. Essentially, this blend between poetry and prose provides a creative expression for theology.

Based on her personal statement of orthodox theology, Voskamp's writing is a reflection of her published commitment to live the message she preaches. Specifically, the premise of *One Thousand Gifts* is to slow down enough to meet God in the present moment. Naturally, her poetic writing style has the same sobering effect. Poetry is a form that demands the reader to slow down. Through her work, Voskamp reinforces the command to "Be still" (Ps. 46.10). She confirms this principle in her interview with Frank Viola where she explains the theory behind her blog: "It's about simply writing for an audience of One. Of asking nothing of the reader — but offering a still, quiet oasis in the cyber sphere to go vertical with God. An island of stillness to know that He is God" ("Beyond"). Contributing to the stilling effect Voskamp intentionally has on readers, one Zondervan executive realizes the significance of Voskamp's writing as an author and a Christian. He acknowledges, "She is poetic and prophetic, saying things that other people aren't saying in a way that other people aren't saying them [. . .] I have friends who have a hard time reading her, because when you read Ann, you can't skim. You have to slow down" (Zicht qtd. in Beaty "How Gratitude"). Though Voskamp's suspected unorthodox views and allegedly cryptic language creates conflict for many, still others attest to her ability to craft

doctrine in a lyrical way. In this regard, Voskamp's literary aesthetics are harmonious in their effort to teach and delight.

Conclusion: Impact on Christian Literature, Women, and Culture

Voskamp and the Blogosphere

In the October 2012 issue, *Christianity Today* identified fifty instrumental women in “profoundly shaping the evangelical church and North American society” (“50 Women”). This article describes the growing rate of female leadership within the church ranging from conference speakers, advocates for human trafficking victims, and internet bloggers. Included among these rising influential figures is Ann Voskamp. In the piece, Leslie Leyland Fields recognizes Voskamp’s social media, radio, television, internet, and literary presence among Christian circles. She also comments on the dissension associated with Voskamp’s work: “To be sure, poetic writing that stretches some metaphors has created controversy in some quarters. But none can deny her growing influence” (“50 Women”). Certainly, Voskamp’s orthodoxy and literary have been questioned, which in fact contribute to her widespread impact on evangelical Christianity. This controversy has brought attention to Voskamp’s work and has sparked important discussions regarding the lack of authority in the blogosphere (Warren) and the role of women in church leadership outside of the pulpit. Ultimately, through her written words, Ann Voskamp has launched a potentially powerful spiritual movement among women and literature in contemporary Christian culture.

Having risen to prominence from the blogosphere, Ann Voskamp belongs to an era of what some call “a sort of cyber-age equivalent to megachurch pastors,” (Warren) which has the potential for both danger and discovery. In her article, Tish Harrison Warren discusses the “crisis of authority” among bloggers who lack a definitive connection to “any larger institution or ecclesial structure” to which they are held accountable (“Who’s in Charge”). Warren fears that with the rising popularity of Christian blogs, readers may be misguided by false doctrine

since bloggers operate independently of church organizations who would have the power to reign in those who misinterpret Scripture. She writes, “The broader church has a responsibility to provide formal support and accountability to teachers, leaders, and writers—whether male or female. If we don’t respond to this current crisis of authority institutionally, we are allowing Christian doctrine to be high jacked by whomever has the loudest voice or biggest platform” (Warren). In her remarks, Warren later refers specifically to Jen Hatmaker’s public endorsement of homosexuality, which clearly operates against the Bible. However, while Warren elicits valid concerns about the sanctity of Scripture and those who are potentially misled by the blogosphere, she may be overlooking the autonomous nature of blogging. In response to Warren’s article, Voskamp also posted an argument titled “About Who’s in Charge of the Blogosphere: an Ongoing Conversation.” In this article, Voskamp’s basic premise defies the notion that blogs should be censored by any one individual or denominational authority:

Who’s in charge of the Blogosphere? Well, the blogosphere isn’t one church, with one globally agreed on doctrine, the blogosphere isn’t a pulpit with one espoused theology, and it isn’t a hospital where one goes when desperately needing surgery — the blogosphere is a library. The blogosphere is a library of storytellers, and while I may — and definitely do — profoundly disagree with other voices in the blogosphere — the point is: We don’t censor a library, we learn how to venture through the library. Because who could ever decide exactly who and what doctrine is in charge of the library? The Catholics or the Methodists or the Atheists or the Reformed or the United Informed, Conformed, and Transformed? Advocating for all believers to be under the wing and roof and authority of local and national leaders is a wise and Biblically needful position —

and many Word witnesses have long been humbly and willingly putting themselves in precisely that needed position. Accountability is always the believer's responsibility, and is always necessary for healthy vitality. Only when you've stayed under a wing, can you learn how to fly. ("About Who's in Charge")

While she does recognize that internet authors are certainly responsible to maintain the integrity of Scripture and lead others in truth, Voskamp claims that ultimately, the reader is responsible to use discernment when reading blog posts. She asks, "If the blogosphere is a library, then perhaps what is needed is not so much deterrents to voices within the blogosphere — but rather thoughtful discernment in the readers?" (Voskamp). In this "ongoing conversation," Voskamp advocates for a balanced approach to contributing and reading blog posts. She demonstrates through her own webpage that the blogosphere can be a tool to proclaim the Gospel in an accessible, inviting medium where the reader is free to accept or reject the message of the article.

Although the blogosphere can become an entrapment for spiritually immature Christians, in her online writing, Voskamp illustrates the benefits of an uncensored blog, such as fostering a developing online community of believers in Christ, which transforms the traditional concept of Biblical discipleship. Naturally, with the growth of digital forums and conversation threads, the prospect of the Christian community has shifted as well. In "The Untapped Potential of Women's Discipleship," Hannah Anderson evaluates the role of the internet in shaping Christian communities and church involvement. She writes that Voskamp and others "with large online followings are leveraging the power of their tribe to change the entire culture of women's discipleship. And women who may feel powerless in their own church are now able to simply gather others who feel similarly disconnected and build their own spaces through her active presence on social media and her website" (12). Even though Anderson underscores the

importance of virtual discipleship that connects others with a community of likeminded Christians and provides an outlet for discussion, she also recognizes the detriment of allowing digital groups to substitute rather than supplement the local church. She writes, “While these online communities offer women acceptance and support, they have the potential to isolate women” who fixate on their “shared [personal] experiences” (12). Because these online conversations typically focus on various issues or struggles common to many of the contributors, they often lack an outside voice with a different perspective; this void creates an environment of complacency and commiseration. However, to combat this effect, Voskamp not only blocks comments from her blog posts, but through her social media presence, she communicates to readers through Biblical truth that support her writing. By entering into these conversations with others, Voskamp cultivates an atmosphere of intimacy and accountability. She enforces this idea by not only acknowledging shortcomings but also by challenging readers to redirect their focus on the Bible:

The Christian needs another Christian who speaks God’s Word to him. She needs her again and again when she becomes uncertain – and this is the power of blogging in the upside down kingdom. This is the holy work of a blog, so don’t every feel shy or ashamed or embarrassed that you blog. Because the body of Christ needs to speak to itself and it needs to speak to the world and this is the beautiful , poy of a blog. I get discouraged and I become uncertain and I fall down and His word through your words is the connective tissue in the body of Christ and we need each other. (“How to Live, Blog, Write”)

Rather than isolating, confusing, and misleading, the Christian blogosphere has the potential to enhance an understanding of doctrine and encourage the body of Christ to apply the power of the Gospel to their lives.

Through her own web publications, Voskamp addresses how blogging can effectively serve as a medium for evangelism and spiritual growth. One key distinction in Voskamp's online presence is her public statement of purpose for her blog posts. In an interview with Frank Viola of *Beyond Evangelical*, Voskamp traces the origins and intentions of her blog site:

I started blogging in 2004, light years ago on the Web. And I began because I have this handicap — I can't figure out my life or see God clearly unless I untangle my life again with words. So my blog wasn't about 'platform' but really, it was everything you are not 'supposed' to do in blogging. I didn't (and still don't) have comments. It's about simply writing for an audience of One. Of asking nothing of the reader — but offering a still, quiet oasis in the cybersphere to go vertical with God. An island of stillness to know that He is God. The blog is meant to be a bit of a side chapel — a place to slip into and still and encounter the glory of God — and come away again with a fresh sense that your life, right where you are, is a holy experience — that God dwells with you and in you, and where you are is holy ground, worthy of reverence and celebration and wonder.

(“Ann Voskamp—*One Thousand Gifts*”)

Although operating a heavily trafficked blog page can certainly yield great controversy and misunderstanding, Voskamp combats these uncertainties by treating writing as an act of worship. By adopting the principle of “Upside Down blogging, with Jesus increasing and us decreasing,” (“Why Blog”) she essentially revolutionizes how the church views discipleship. Here an online

community of seekers can be lead to Christ in their shared “hunting for a corner of joy and grace and God” (“Meet”).

Writing as Worship

In addition to her active contributions to blogging and social media, Ann Voskamp also addresses the way the church approaches Christian authors and literature. In a challenge to other female Christian authors, she explains the significance of including personal memoirs in spiritual content:

You are an artist and you make the truth of the world new to be me again when you tell the truth through your story that is new to me. You make art, and you don't invent truth, you tell me the real honest truth [. . .] and you make it accessible to me because you tell it to me in your story. You are an artist of the Word, daughter of your Father God who has always been an artist, who has always been a creator. (“How to”)

With this charge to other bloggers, published authors, and mothers, Voskamp emphasizes that writing is a ministry, and God will use those willing to be used. While discussing the plight of “convinced secularity” among the church, Walter Brueggemann acknowledges the need for a “preacher” to “open up this greatly reduced truth of guilt” (17). In his explanation, Brueggemann again interchangeably uses the terms prophet, poet, and preacher. He calls for “an artistic rendering of a new truth-filled world in which many people come to live and begin to function again with the freedom that belongs peculiarly to God’s children. [. . .] But it will not happen, until finally comes the poet, the one who speaks honestly about the incongruity, who speaks buoyantly about the alternative” (17). In her analysis on the Biblical approach to writing,

Voskamp echoes Brueggemann's theory: "God speaks through prophets and poets and the pots all cracked. And He speaks through you in these last days, these days when: 'I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy.' ~Acts 2:17" ("How to").

Additionally, in her article "Ann Voskamp's 3 Secrets to Writing," Margaret Feinberg notes that Voskamp's voice as a "stunning poet prophet" "stirs her holy imagination" (*Margaret*). In response to this assertion, Feinberg summarizes Voskamp's approach to her writing style: "Prophetic language is always poetic language, and it causes us to engage the text differently" ("3 Secrets"). Although Voskamp recognizes the importance of being a vessel for God to speak through creatively, she does not however argue that God's truth should be reconstructed or reinvented; rather, the artist should transparently communicate with her audience in a way that draws them to the Source of truth.

Admittedly, however, Voskamp's representation of Scripture and language as art has caused crippling criticism. For example, after recently being charged with plagiarizing a portion of her blog post, Voskamp issued a poetic apology explaining her intentions flowed from "intimate and vulnerable grief" "over sexual abuse in the church" that lead her to mistakenly "lyrically paraphrase and use [another author's] phrases" ("Mosaic of Grace"). Following this public apology, one critic heavily questioned Voskamp's ethics in the literary style of her blog post. In this critique, the author argues that Voskamp "uses language to [. . .] manipulate her readers. Voskamp writes in a style that seems to flow straight from her amygdala. Words well up, bubbling forth from deep wells of emotion" ("A Tangled Web of Grace"). Additionally, the critic suggests that instead of "sermoniz[ing]" her mistake "with a surprisingly tidy message for someone known for her epic brokenness," Voskamp failed to clearly take responsibility for plagiarizing content from another webpage ("Tangled Web"). Despite her allegedly insincere

and incomplete confession, Voskamp acknowledges that her lyricism and lack of “proper accreditation” may in fact lead to “confusion” (“Mosaic”). In this incident, Voskamp illustrates the vital responsibility that authors have when using artistry to effectively and authentically communicate Biblical responses to crises.

Though not without miscommunications and controversy, Voskamp’s writing demonstrates the potentially powerful effects of Christian literature that fuses orthodoxy with poetry. From blog posts to books, Voskamp’s unique style has captivated and compelled many into a deeper relationship with their Creator. To be sure, however, Voskamp’s words alone are powerless to convey the truth and depth of God. In fact, her writing simply builds upon what Scripture teaches—that God communicates to us in the world through Christ’s incarnated presence in His created world. On this subject, Tozer states, “So in part run the ancient creeds, and so the inspired Word declares. Behind the veil is God, that God after whom the world, with strange inconsistency, has felt, ‘if haply they might... find him’ (Acts 17:27). He has discovered Himself to some extent in nature, but more perfectly in the Incarnation. Now He waits to show Himself in ravishing fullness to the humble of soul and the pure in heart” (36). Additionally, Tozer outlines the church’s need for God and the written word as the catalyst for a divine encounter:

Sound Bible exposition is an imperative must in the Church of the Living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on it such a way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible

is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His Presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and center of their hearts. (9)

Tozer rightly asserts that the Bible serves as an instrument for God to communicate with His children. Similarly, without the Holy Spirit's working and the author's humility, Christian literature alone cannot create or bring a reader to the knowledge of truth. Though not advocating Voskamp's writing holds any special revelation outside of what Scripture records, another author acknowledges that "Ann Voskamp penetrates the soul with words that arrest us, convict us, and compel us to the arms of our Father. Ann Voskamps come along once in a generation. We best pay attention" (Lyons). Through her lyrical language and inspirational message, Voskamp lays the framework for what could potentially become a spiritual movement originating with literature.

Cultivating Community among Women

Possibly one of the most compelling aspects of Voskamp's writing is her accessibility; she exposes relatable weaknesses that women are ashamed to admit to. Rather than simply confessing brokenness, Voskamp reveals how insufficiency in a Christian's life can actually be the grace that God uses to draw her to Himself (II Corin. 12.9). In "7 Women Every Christian Should Know," Michelle Derusha addresses the vital role of women's leadership in evangelicalism. She recognizes that women's narratives serve profound purposes in the church to both edify and instruct:

Women's stories matter, not only for the inspiration and encouragement they offer, but also because the preservation of these stories presents us with a fuller, richer, more accurate history. From the earliest days of the church, when women gathered to pray with the disciples in the Upper Room, to today, when they teach, write, lead, and minister to multitudes, women have always been an integral part of the church. Their lives and legacies have much to teach us. (53)

By sharing her raw stories with others, Voskamp underpins the importance of allowing God to lead through her life. In fact, Voskamp connects the role of women in Christ's eyes by saying, "Christ didn't degrade women in His talk, but He made women heroes in His stories" ("Sticky Notes"). Despite her ordinary beginnings as a homeschooling mother and occasional blogger, Voskamp's work may spark a sisterhood of women in Christ that remain faithful to declaring the truth of Scripture. She professes that "there is the legacy of Word-wielders and poets, the unlikely and uncredentialed, a quiet rising of Amoses, who have heard the roar of the Lion of Judah and cannot be silent now, wordsmiths who have experienced the charged and living Word and their tongue and their pen simply cannot be silenced now" ("About Who's in Charge"). As a female Christian author, Voskamp has the ability to impact women by voicing their spiritual inadequacies and pointing them to Christ through her personal commitment to discipleship of believers.

Impact on Christian Culture

However, despite the level of leadership attention Voskamp has received from Christian circles, she resorts to a reversed philosophy of cultural impact. For Voskamp, the idea of holding a position of prominence is both intimidating and humbling. According to an extensive interview with Katelyn Beaty, Voskamp, the "intensely shy writer," believes, "We need to break

the ladders and go lower [. . .]. That means destroying platforms and living hidden lives that have dirt underneath our fingernails, as opposed to everyone striving to get behind a microphone. . . . Numbers can be toxic to our souls” (“How Gratitude Made”). Voskamp also bases her perspective of leadership on the “upside down kingdom” where she explains, “The only platform Jesus Christ stood on was a place to lay down and die. And we as His followers can stand only on that kind of platform—a place to come lay down as a sacrifice” (“How to”). In spite of her reluctant rise to prominence, Voskamp has used her position to raise millions of dollars for nonprofit groups serving refugees (“How Gratitude Made”), and she has also donated countless hours partnering with Compassion International, which leaves her feeling “most ridiculously alive” (“Meet Ann”). Through her humble approach to leadership, Voskamp demonstrates the impact of servanthood among believers. Such activism goes beyond the theoretical notion of the “pure religion and undefiled” (James 1.27) she advocates in her writing and instead becomes the application of Biblical exposition.

Essentially, Voskamp’s social activism is an extension of her writing; her ministry efforts embody the message of her literature. Through her books, Voskamp has been credited as a “writer [who] could spark a social movement among North American Christians” (Beaty). Because of her active role through writing and working towards securing justice for oppressed, unheard, and victimized people groups, Voskamp has incited change that has the potential to inspire the way Christians seek God and interact with others. Recognizing the implications of Voskamp’s literary message, Christine Caine writes, “Few authors have impacted my own life like Ann Voskamp. If we can live out the truth contained within *The Broken Way*, I believe we will reach and impact our generation like never before” (2). Voskamp’s activism is shaped by the call of Christ to “[g]o out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my

house may be filled” (Luke 14.23). Through her work, Voskamp harnesses the power of language to poetically communicate the power of the Gospel to redeem and restore (187). Due to her vulnerability, she also cultivates an extensive outreach to propel women into *koinonia* with God and one another. Ultimately, Voskamp’s social activism reveals the power of Biblically inspired, poetically expressed literature to reach a corrupt culture through Christ.

Works Cited

- “A Tangled Web of Grace.” *A Better Country*, 24 Jan. 2018, www.bettercountry.net/a-better-country/a-tangled-web-of-grace.
- Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. Basic Books, 1985.
- “Ann Voskamp’s Best Selling Book One Thousand Gifts – A Collision of Inspiration and the New Spirituality.” *Lighthouse Trails*, 19 June 2011, www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=6604.
- Anderson, Hannah. “The Untapped Potential of Women’s Discipleship.” *Change Makers*, 2017, pp.11-15. *Christianity Today*, www.christianitytoday.com/lyris/ctwomen/img/CT_Women_2017.pdf.
- Beaty, Katelyn. “How Gratitude Made Ann Voskamp an Activist.” *Christianity Today*, 21 Oct. 2016, www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/november/contemplative-activist.html?start=1.
- Beersma, Hans. *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*. Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011.
- Boyett, Micha. “Ann Voskamp, Tim Challies, Beth Moore: Dinner and a Defense of Earnestness.” *Christianity Today*, May 2012. www.christianitytoday.com/women/2012/may/ann-voskamp-tim-challies-beth-moore-dinner-and-defense-of.html.
- Brow, Martin. “In Defense of the Puritans.” *Fire and Ice: Puritan Reformed Writings*, 1981. www.puritansermons.com/banner/brown1.htm.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Finally Comes the Poet*. Fortress Press, 1989.
- Challies, Tim. “One Thousand Gifts.” *Challies*, 2012. www.challies.com/book-reviews/one-thousand-gifts/.

---. "In Which I Ask Ann Voskamp's Forgiveness..." *Challies*, 28 May 2012.

www.challies.com/articles/in-which-i-ask-ann-voskamps-forgiveness/.

Dassault, Dave. "Some Implications for Biblical Interpretation of the Art of Biblical Poetry by

Robert Alter." *Conference Papers*, 1991, place.asburyseminary.edu/trenpapers/1619.

Davies, David. *Aesthetics and Literature*. Continuum, 2007.

Derusha, Michelle. "7 Women Every Christian Should Know." *Change Makers*, 2017, pp. 52-55.

Christianity Today,

www.christianitytoday.com/lyris/ctwomen/img/CT_Women_2017.pdf.

DeWaay, Bob. "Romantic Panenthesism, a Review of One Thousand Gifts by Ann Voskamp." *A*

Ministry in His Service, 19 June 2011, www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/blog/?p=6614.

Dyrness, William. "Foreword: Remembering Clyde S. Kilby." Paraclete Press. i-v.

Fackre, Gabriel. "Narrative Theology from an Evangelical Perspective." *Faith and Narrative*,

edited by Keith E. Yandell. 2001, pp. 188-201. *EBSCOhost*.

web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE1MD

A2MI9fQU41?sid=f95d2bc7-3d77-4c08-87be-

12862b9cafa6@sessionmgr4008&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1.

Feinberg, Margaret. "Ann Voskamp's 3 Secrets to Writing." *Margaret*,

margaretfeinberg.com/ann-voskamps-3-secrets-writing/.

Fields, Leslie Leyland et al. "50 Women You Should Know." *Christianity Today*, 19 Oct. 2012,

www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/october/50-women-you-should-

know.html?paging=off.

Guite, Malcom. *Faith, Hope, and Poetry*. Ashgate, 2012.

Kilby, Clyde S. "The Aesthetic Poverty of Evangelicalism." Shaw Books, pp. 277-78.

- . *The Arts and the Christian Imagination: Essays on Art, Literature, and Aesthetics*. Edited by William Dyrness and Keith Call, Paraclete Press, 2016.
- Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*. HarperCollins, 1980.
- Maritain, Jacques. "Christian Art." Shaw Books, pp.53-54.
- Miller, Perry. *The American Puritans, Their Prose and Poetry*. Doubleday, 1956.
- "On the Farm with Ann Voskamp." *Haven Today*, 24 Oct. 2016,
www.haventoday.org/blog/2016/10/24/on-the-farm-ann-voskamp/.
- Ryken, Leyland. *The Christian Imagination*. Shaw Books, 2002.
- . "Words of Delight: A Hedonistic Defense of Literature." Shaw Books, pp. 138-53.
- Schmemmann, Alexander. *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004.
- Stone, Rachel Marie. "Why Gratitude is not Enough." *Christianity Today*, Aug. 2011,
www.christianitytoday.com/women/2011/august/why-gratitude-is-not-enough.html.
- Suberman, Stella. "The Art of Memoir." *South Atlantic Review*, vol. 70, no. 2, Spring 2005, pp. 11-19. *JSTOR*,
www.jstor.org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/stable/pdf/20064630.pdf?refreqid=excelsior:c591e8aea71cc034f461acb0b72d5bff.
- The Holy Bible*. Authorized King James Version. Thomas Nelson, 2001.
- Tozer, A.W. *The Pursuit of God*. WingSpread Publishers, 1982.
- Viola, Frank. "Ann Voskamp—One Thousand Gifts." *Frank Viola*, Feb 2013,
frankviola.org/2013/02/11/annvoskamp/.
- Voskamp, Ann. "A Mosaic of Grace." *A Holy Experience*, 28 Jan. 2018,
annvoskamp.com/2018/01/a-mosaic-of-grace/.

---. "About Who's in Charge of the Blogosphere: An Ongoing Conversation." *A Holy Experience*, annvoskamp.com/2017/05/about-whos-in-charge-of-the-blogosphere-an-ongoing-conversation/.

---. "Done with God? The (Brutally) Honest Psalms Series: #1." *A Holy Experience*, May 2012. annvoskamp.com/2017/09/done-with-god-the-brutally-honest-psalms-series-1/.

---. "How to Live, Blog, Write." *A Holy Experience*, 23 Oct. 2012,

---. "Meet Ann." *A Holy Experience*, annvoskamp.com/ann-voskamp/.

---. "Sticky Notes for Your Soul." *A Holy Experience*, 24 Jan. 2018, annvoskamp.com/sticky-notes-signup/.

---. *The Broken Way*. Zondervan, 2016.

---. "Twenty Thoughts on Intimacy with God." *A Holy Experience*, May 2012.

annvoskamp.com/2012/05/how-to-really-survive-a-heart-attack/.

---. *One Thousand Gifts*. Zondervan, 2010.

---. "Who I Am." *A Holy Experience*. annvoskamp.com/ann-voskamp/.

---. "Why Blog." *A Holy Experience*. annvoskamp.com/ann-voskamp.

Warren, Tish Harrison. "Who's in Charge of the Blogosphere?" *Christianity Today*, Apr. 2017,

[www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/april/whos-in-charge-of-christian-](http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/april/whos-in-charge-of-christian-blogsphere.html)

[blogsphere.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2017/april/whos-in-charge-of-christian-blogsphere.html).

Wiman, Christian. *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

Womble, Rebekah. "The Broken Way." *Wise in His Eyes*, 17 Feb. 2017,

wiseinhiseyes.com/2017/02/17/the-broken-way/.

Worthen, Molly. *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in American Evangelicalism*.

Oxford UP, 2014.