

Systematic Theology for the Local Church

#21—Bibliology—Part XII¹

The Self-Authentication of Scripture

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For the upcoming studies in theology proper: Become familiar with Sections 13-26 in House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*. Also, read Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, ch. 6, Introduction to the Doctrine of God, ch. 7, the Names and Nature of God, ch. 8, God as Trinity, ch. 9 (except for the sections on Christ and the Holy Spirit), The Trinity in the Creeds, ch. 10, The Eternal Decree of God. Later in the section on Theology Proper we will suggest readings in Wayne House's *Charts on Open Theism and Orthodoxy*. If you have the book, you should begin reading Bruce Ware's *Their God Is Too Small*. For study #22, The Existence of God, you can concentrate on Reymond, ch. 6, and House's *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine*, section 15.

A significant defection

Francis J. (Frank) Beckwith is a tenured Associate Professor of Philosophy and Church-State Studies at Baylor University. In March of 2007, he announced that he had decided to “seek full communion with the Roman Catholic Church.” At that time he was the President of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). He subsequently resigned from that office. Here is part of his description of what happened, as found on his web site²:

The past four months have moved quickly for me and my wife. As you probably know, my work in philosophy, ethics, and theology has always been Catholic friendly, but I would have never predicted that I would return to the Church, for there seemed to me too many theological and ecclesiastical issues that appeared insurmountable. However, in January, at the suggestion of a dear friend, I began reading the Early Church Fathers as well as some of the more sophisticated works on justification by Catholic authors. I became convinced that the Early Church is more Catholic than Protestant and that the Catholic view of justification, correctly understood, is biblically and historically defensible. Even though I also believe that the Reformed view is biblically and historically defensible, I think the Catholic view has more explanatory power to account for both all the biblical texts on justification as well as the church's historical understanding of salvation prior to the Reformation all the way back to the ancient church of the first few centuries. Moreover, much of what I have taken for granted as a Protestant—e.g., the catholic creeds, the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation, the Christian understanding of man, and the canon of Scripture—is the result of a Church that made judgments about these matters and on which non-Catholics, including Evangelicals, have declared and grounded their Christian orthodoxy in a world hostile to it. Given these considerations, I thought it wise for me to err on the side of the Church with historical and theological continuity with the first generations of Christians that followed Christ's Apostles.

Coming to the truth

Now this is a very striking statement and one that has led to much discussion on the Web and elsewhere. I do not claim to understand just what is going on in his life. But one of the things that I see here, particularly in the last sentence in what I quoted, is the idea that a person can weigh alternatives in what we might call

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² http://rightreason.ektapos.com/archives/2007/05/my_return_to_th.html

“spiritual systems” and come to a valid conclusion by means of reason. In addition, on Beckwith’s blog there appeared a long series of responses to his return to Rome (he was raised Roman Catholic), many of which seem to suggest that one can intellectually weigh systems (in this case, Roman Catholicism versus evangelicalism, with its assent to the sole authority of Scripture). For example, some bloggers say they decided on the basis of the evidence to return to or go to the Catholic Church. Here is an example:

Evangelicalism was where I first heard the Gospel presented in a way that made coherent sense, and I will always feel gratitude and affection for it for that reason. But Catholicism was where the puzzle pieces finally clicked together completely. I was received into the Church in 1994. Welcome, welcome home.

While most such comments came from people who identified themselves on the blog as Catholics, there were some who identified themselves as evangelicals who seemed to espouse this position—that honest searching can lead a person to what is true.

Only God can know Frank Beckwith’s heart. He may be born again and he may not. If he is born again, then he has entered into error that is publicly visible. If he is not born again, then he is now giving evidence of being an apostate. In my view his words and actions point to apostasy. Unfortunately, there were not many bloggers who were willing to assert this much (at least on Beckwith’s own site!).

I can understand that Roman Catholics might think of what Beckwith did in terms of evaluating alternatives. But finding the right way to reach God does not come on the basis of weighing evidence. Reformed Protestantism stands for the view that the Holy Spirit brings conviction of the truth of Scripture and of the provision of salvation through the Savior who is found in Scripture. It does not stand for the view that we are capable of finding the right position by comparing systems. This weighing seems to me to be present in many of the responses in the blog. Beckwith essentially says that he weighed the evidence and chose Roman Catholicism because it has a better system. He may genuinely think this, but no one truly comes to Christ and the best way of understanding Scripture by this route—because we are all running from God and our minds are dulled by sin and we do not know how to find the truth. Recall my quote from Reymond in the last study: outside of Christ we are “spiritually blind, spiritually hostile, and spiritually dead.”³

Many of the bloggers tell Beckwith what he should believe. While they are well intentioned, he can only come to a knowledge of the truth by the ministry of the Spirit that convicts him that Scripture carries its own authority and that he does not need to have a tradition interpret it for him.

Notice in the following quote that the blogger appears to acknowledge that Beckwith is a genuine believer (who is presumably just in the wrong place), since he prays that God would be “with” him:

Hi Dr. Beckwith,

Thank you for your decision to step down as president of ETS.

I know that this conversion is hard for you and your family. I pray that God will be with you in this difficult situation.

I do not agree with you regarding Romanism and its teaching on justification that it is biblical. And I find it difficult to grasp how the Early Church Fathers would become for you the decisive factor of truth rather than surveying the biblical exegesis for that matter.

³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 148.

In any case, I appreciate your journey of faith. I do hope, now you have converted, that you will now look at our Reformed Faith in a more comprehensive and exhaustive look than when you were a protestant before.

Here is a Catholic blogger who seems to suggest that Beckwith made the right decision between alternatives:

Wow. Congrats, Dr. Beckwith. As a convert from Calvinism, let me join you in affirming that all that was most good and holy has not been left behind, but confirmed in unimaginable splendor. The road will be rough, but may your many gifts now be brought to bear fruit in our most Holy Church. Heaven knows we need them. . . .

Many years ago Joy and I met a young married woman who said that she carefully reviewed the evidences for the world's major religions and concluded that Christianity was the most reasonable, and so decided to come to Christ. If she was a genuine believer, and she seemed to be, she may have *thought* that before she was saved she was using her mind to objectively weigh alternatives, but it was really the Spirit's convicting work telling her that the Bible provided the only answer for her needs. The kind of approach that she demonstrated is like Beckwith's and that of many of the bloggers who responded to what he did.

I often hear people say that they were searching for God and found him and were saved. Now they may be genuine Christians in some cases, but no one searches for God. Very important for this study are Paul's words in Romans 3:

¹⁰ As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." ³ "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know." ¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

People who say they were searching could be describing something that occurred when the Spirit was drawing them to Christ and haven't realized what was happening, ascribing their thinking to their own initiative. But they never would have come to God by looking at evidence or seeking the truth on their own.

Interestingly and tellingly, over and over the Roman Catholics that write in the blog speak of coming to "the Church," as even Beckwith does. They do not speak of being saved or of coming to Christ or of coming to know Christ. They sound as if they are choosing a system, not a Savior. The true Savior can only be found by the convicting work of the Spirit working through Scripture, convincing a sinner that Scripture is true.

Presuppositionalism and classical apologetics

This is not a study about Francis Beckwith or Catholicism or defection to Catholicism, but about how we understand that the Bible is the Word of God, how we come to the conviction that it commands our attention. This means that the issue for Frank Beckwith and anyone in a similar position is whether Scripture is the sole authority for faith and practice or the Roman Catholic Church is the sole authority.

I want to introduce you at this point to something that will help us to better understand the problem with the views of reaching God that I have been talking about. Christian apologetics is concerned with presenting arguments for the rationality of Christianity, defending Christianity against detractors and evaluating the worth of other worldviews. We need to consider two schools of apologetics in this study.

The first is classical apologetics or evidentialism,⁴ which generally is used by Catholics, Arminians and those who would say they are partial Calvinists. Classical apologetics attempts to get unsaved people to weigh the evidence for evangelical Christianity and perhaps see that it is reasonable and should be followed. It assumes that the human mind can successfully evaluate information about God and His Word. So it uses such things as arguments for the existence of God to help the unbeliever to come to know God. It also assumes that one can demonstrate the infallibility of the Bible by rational argumentation. Here is what Reymond says about classical apologetics:

Classical apologetics, represented by Ligonier apologist R. C. Sproul, argues for the infallible authority of the Bible as the Word of God on the basis of a progression from the premise of the Bible's basic or general reliability or trustworthiness to the conclusion of its infallibility and hence of its divine authoritativeness.⁵

Showing that the argumentation involved will not lead to a convincing conclusion, he observes

If this line of reasoning is sound, why should anyone ever use any other line of argument for the Christian faith? Why not just make the case with the unbeliever for the infallible authority of Scripture and argue everything else from this "presupposition"?⁶

The second approach is presuppositionalism,⁷ which was developed primarily by Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Seminary and is held by many Reformed theologians and philosophers.⁸ As opposed to evidentialism or classical apologetics, presuppositionalism asserts that the human mind is corrupted by sin and runs from the truth as found in Scripture. Although every human being knows about God from general revelation, he suppresses the information it provides. Here is a description of evidentialism by a presuppositionalist (underlining is mine):

Evidentialism is the methodology that believes that there is epistemological⁹ common ground between the believer and the unbeliever. Evidentialists hold that man's mind is neutral and is capable of judging the credibility of truth claims. The evidentialist puts God on trial using the unbeliever's mind as a neutral court. He appeals to reason and proceeds to faith using empirical evidences or historically verifiable facts to argue a probability case for God.

They argue using laws of logic and so-called neutral evidences, seeking to avoid circular reasoning in favor of flat-line reasoning. However, even evidentialists use circular reasoning as they begin with independent rationalism and empiricism as their ultimate starting points (i.e. presuppositions).

The main problem with evidentialism is that it grants the unbeliever too much. The evidentialist grants the unbeliever the right to think autonomously (independently) while at the same time asking him to give up his autonomy through conversion. This is theologically impossible. The unbeliever will always employ his tools of reason to dismiss the arguments for Christianity.

⁴ I am aware that in the narrowest sense 'evidentialism' and 'classical apologetics' refer to different approaches to apologetics, although they are also used in some contexts in an overlapping sense, which is what I am doing here. Examples of people who are evidentialists or classical apologists are R. C. Sproul, Hank Hanegraaf, Lee Strobel, Ravi Zacharias, Norman Geisler, Hugh Ross, John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley, William Lane Craig and Josh McDowell.

⁵ Reymond, 74.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For helpful overviews of presuppositionalism see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presuppositional_apologetics and www.answers.com/topic/presuppositional-apologetics

⁸ Some other presuppositional apologists are Carl F. H. Henry, Gordon Clark, Francis Schaeffer, Abraham Kuyper, Robert Reymond, Greg Bahnsen and John Whitcomb.

⁹ 'Epistemological' refers to the nature of knowledge, how we can know things.

Evidentialism is thought of as a form of pre-evangelism; an intellectual preparation that precedes the actual gospel presentation. It is a rational and empirical task that is logically prior to any theological considerations.

On the other hand, presuppositionalism presents the gospel first, then follows with an apologetic defense if objections to faith are given.

....

What then is the proper place for evidence in the apologetic task? Evidences must be presented in the defining context of the gospel message. It is in the context of the preached Word that God works His work of regenerating grace which enables the spiritually blind to see and believe. Evidences, no matter how compelling, do not convince those who have not submitted to God's Word in faith (Luke 16:31). Because of the noetic effects of sin [effects on the mind], fallen man must be born from above in order to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). Fallen man submits to the “arguments whereby [holy scripture] doth abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God” only in the context of “the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts” (*Westminster Confession*, 1.5).

In our witnessing, we do present evidence but only in the defining context of the Word. We have the historical evidences of miracles, especially the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and fulfilled prophecy. We have the testimonies of changed lives. We have a basis for science in the God who created an orderly universe of design and gave man both senses that really are in touch with objective reality and rational minds with a logic that really does measure truth in the created realm. We have a basis for purpose, meaning and morality, for the ultimate reality is the personal God of Scripture and not an impersonal universe or impersonal axioms. We accept God as God and we find flowing out of this a world that is the real world, and everyone in their heart of hearts knows it.¹⁰

The self-authenticating Scriptures

Most importantly for this study, the presuppositionalist emphasizes that the Bible is self-authenticating. This means that it carries its own justification for its claim to be from God and to be true. Here is Raymond's description of this quality of the Bible:

[The Bible] receives its authority from heaven; it requires no earthly advocacy in regard to the issue of its authority. Its authority is intrinsic and inherent; that is, it is self-validating. In no sense is its authority derived from human testimony.¹¹

In his *Institutes* Calvin speaks of the Bible as αὐτόπιστον (*autopiston*; self-authenticating).¹²

No human proof can lead a person to give assent to this, because without regeneration we will reject this authority. Outside of Christ our sinful nature is at enmity with God, and we lack the ability to think the

¹⁰ D. Massimo Lorenzini, “Defending the Faith: An Introduction to the Presuppositional Method.” This can be found at www.frontlinemin.org/defendfaith.asp.

¹¹ Raymond, 115.

¹² His French version of this is striking: “porte avec soi sa créance”—it carries in itself its own credibility or credentials.

thoughts of God. In his critique of *Classical Apologetics*, by R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley,¹³ Greg Bahnsen explains this:

A concept which has somewhere been *lost* by our authors is that of man's total depravity, including the noetic effects of sin. They tell us that rational apologetics as "pre-evangelism" can establish the cognitive clarification of Christianity and bring the natural man to an intellectual assent, but to take him *beyond that* to a personal trust in the heart, emotions, and will is solely the work of the Holy Spirit (pp. 21-22). Scripture teaches otherwise. The problem with fallen men is not simply in their will and emotions. They have just as much "become vain in their reasoning" like fools (Rom. 1:21-22). Will such "natural men" use their "natural reason" to receive the things of the Spirit? They *cannot* (1 Cor. 2:14). In terms of reasoning from nature to God, Paul said this about the natural man: "There is none that understands; there is none that seeks after God" (Rom. 3:11). The work of the Holy Spirit is just as much needed to bring *intellectual* assent as it is to produce emotional trust. By suggesting otherwise, our author's conception of apologetics is untrue to their Reformed theology.¹⁴

Only *after* regeneration can we appreciate this quality of the Bible and subsequently know the truth. Here is Reymond again:

I do believe that the Bible is internally self-consistent and that it does "fit the facts" of history and archaeology and so on. But this is because I am a Christian, having been persuaded as a result of the Holy Spirit's regenerating work that the Bible is in fact the authoritative Word of God, that it is intrinsically authoritative and *is to be believed because it is the Word of God*.¹⁵

So the presuppositionalist says that we must "presuppose" that Scripture is true and that it is from God and must also "presuppose" the God of Scripture. We cannot reason our way to these truths (no one ever will); they are starting points. And we only find these starting points when we are born again.¹⁶

By the way, a person can certainly become saved without knowing about presuppositionalism. Also, a person can come to Christ in the midst of hearing arguments for the truth and authority of Scripture or arguments for the existence of God or the reasonableness of Christianity. But such salvation does not come *because of* these arguments of the classical apologist, but because the Holy Spirit first convicts a person of the truth of Scripture and the value of the gospel message. Again, the reason we do not come to God through evidences and arguments is that we are blinded to the value and truth of Scripture until we are born again.¹⁷

This brings us to my main point: No one—not Frank Beckwith or anyone else—can weigh evidence for the true way to God and come to the right conclusion. He certainly can weigh some kind of evidence and conclude that he prefers Catholicism. But no one can weigh in his own mind the information found in the Bible and decide to come to God for salvation. No one will do this, because outside of Christ our minds always seek alternate interpretations of the biblical information that we are confronted with. No one accepts the message of salvation found in Scripture apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts the sinner

¹³ Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984.

¹⁴ Greg Bahnsen, "A Critique of "Classical Apologetics," which can be found at www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA061.htm.

¹⁵ Reymond, 73.

¹⁶ It is valuable to see the implications of this for Christian counseling. The problems of the heart that manifest themselves in people's lives as depression, 'mental illness,' etc., can only be helped by God's Word as it changes the heart. Thus the message of this true biblical counseling cannot help the unsaved person, who cannot and will not accept the value of Scripture. Nor will God heal an unsaved person's heart with Scripture.

¹⁷ This tells us some important things about how a person gets saved. First, as we know from Rom. 10:14-15, Scripture must be present for a person to make a genuine profession of faith. Secondly, a presentation of the gospel that omits or minimizes the meaning and effect of sin is inadequate. I was told when I was a young Christian that in witnessing it is best to downplay sin because people don't like to hear about it. Witnessing that omits sin, death and the cross and emphasizes the benefits that Christ can bring to a person's life today only leads to false professions.

that what God says is true. First Corinthians 2:11-16 tells us that spiritual truths are spiritually discerned—through the work of the author of Scripture:

¹¹ For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. ¹⁴ The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. ¹⁵ The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

I appreciate the words of J. I. Packer:

The Scriptures *authenticate themselves* to Christian believers through the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to recognize, and bow before, divine realities. It is he who enlightens us to receive that man Jesus as God's incarnate son, and our Saviour; similarly, it is he who enlightens us to receive sixty-six pieces of human writing as God's inscripturated Word, given to make us "wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).¹⁸

Frank Beckwith may be saved and may at this time simply be involved in a significant error. But it is more likely that he is unsaved and has not been the recipient of the saving calling of the Holy Spirit. If he had been saved, he would have acknowledged that Scripture alone is to be one's authority in the matter of coming to God.

I have a great deal of trouble with many on the blogs who call him a Christian brother. He has rejected the heart of Reformed Christianity—that the Bible alone is our sole authority for faith and practice—and knowingly become part of a system that denies the sufficiency of the completed work of Christ. Even Beckwith says in some of his explanations that he wants to add his works as means to reach God. I am not saying that a Catholic cannot be saved. But I am saying that it is likely to be very rare, because at the heart of this position is rejection of the primacy of Scripture.

The answer to Beckwith must be that he rejects the sole authority of Scripture and in doing so rejects the only ground for saving faith. He rejects what Reymond calls the *Ποῦ Στῶ* (*pou stō*), a phrase drawn from Archimedes and appropriate for describing Scripture as the basis for knowledge.¹⁹

This is a fitting place to conclude our studies in bibliology. We have studied many qualities of Scripture, starting with our need for an authority for our lives. Now we have come full circle. We see that the Bible is the ultimate authority over us because it carries in itself unique authentication from God. Nothing outside the Bible—whether arguments or experience or anything else—can serve as an authority to demonstrate the truthfulness of the Bible, because then it would stand above the Bible. And nothing can provide truth about God that would lead a person to come to God, because it doesn't possess the life-changing power of Scripture, the only authority in the things of God.

Here are the key points that we should take from this study:

1. The Bible is the sole authority for faith and practice.

¹⁸ J. I. Packer, *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 143.

¹⁹ Reymond, 79.

2. The Bible takes precedence over all sources of information in spiritual matters.
3. The Bible can be understood by individuals (but only by the teaching of the Holy Spirit) apart from the decisions of human beings, whether a church group or otherwise.
4. The Bible carries its own authentication as being from God and being true.
5. If we are outside of Christ, we will always reject the truth claims of the Bible and the gospel itself.
6. No one can reason his way to God.
7. Without the work of the Holy Spirit who opens our minds and hearts to the meaning and value of Scripture, we cannot and will not come to God.

I thank God for this revealed authority for life and acknowledge that only by first accepting the gospel message as found in Scripture can a person reach God. I could never have reasoned my way to God. The Holy Spirit convicted me that the words of Scripture were true when they told me I was a sinner. The Bible proved in my conversion—as it does in every conversion of a lost sinner—that it alone carries the power to bring me to God. Thank God for his Book!

Study questions

1. Please read on the Web at least one of the readings on presuppositionalism found in the footnotes:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presuppositional_apologetics

<http://www.answers.com/topic/presuppositional-apologetics>

www.frontlinemin.org/defendfaith.asp

www.cmfnw.com/articles/PA061.htm

Follow links on presuppositionalism and classical apologetics/evidentialism and try to wrap yourself around these schools of thinking.

2. Try to explain what the presuppositionalist means when he speaks of “presupposing” that Scripture is the Word of God.
3. What implications does this study have for the way we should present the gospel?

Running compilation of key definitions

1. Systematic theology: The organized presentation of all that the Bible teaches about God and His works.
2. Exegesis: The actual practice of studying or interpreting a document or other message to determine its meaning.
3. Context: Context in a document or utterance is the surroundings of a portion of a word, a word, or a group of words.
4. Bibliology: The doctrinal study of the nature of the Bible.
5. Biblical authority: The quality inherent in Scripture by virtue of which human beings are completely answerable to its content.
6. Revelation: The information about Himself given by God to human beings.
7. General revelation: God's disclosure of Himself, available directly to everyone, given through means other than dreams, visions, direct words and Christ Himself.
8. Special revelation: The disclosure of information from God that is not available directly to all human beings.
9. Inspiration: A term applied to the Bible denoting that it is the product of God's creative activity, figuratively breathed out from Him (2 Tim. 3:16); applies to the process of recording Scripture, not specifically to the people involved; actually, *expiration* would be a better term to reflect the concept of 2 Tim. 3:16; the result is *inerrancy*.
10. Textual criticism: The science and art of attempting to discover the original text of a literary work for which the original document does not exist. It is especially important for biblical studies, and the foundational endeavor to all subsequent investigation of the Scriptures.
11. Canon: Transliterated from a Greek Word meaning "standard"; as used of the Bible, it refers to books authenticated as possessing divine origin and therefore authoritative; the Jewish canon consists of thirty-nine books, the Protestant of sixty-six and the Catholic of eighty (including apocryphal books).
12. Inerrancy is a term applied to the Bible, although not specifically found in it; it denotes that the Bible, as originally written, possessed no humanly induced deviations from the message God intended to be recorded and that it is true in every respect; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:19.
13. Infallibility: Although some assert that this term has a different meaning from inerrancy, the two terms are, for purposes of biblical study, synonymous; the Bible is infallible because inerrant, and inerrant because infallible.
14. Illumination is the teaching ministry of the Spirit of God that imparts understanding of the message of Scripture to the believer; not to be confused with inspiration, which in the Bible is used of the work of God in giving Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16); 1 Jn. 2:20; Jn. 16:13.