

# THE APOLOGETICAL VALUE OF THE SELF-WITNESS OF SCRIPTURE

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## INTRODUCTION

PHILOSOPHY traditionally has handled the analysis of the origin of knowledge by making authority one of the four possible sources of knowledge. Two sources of knowledge have been viewed as secondary sources: authority and intuition-mysticism. Two sources of knowledge have been viewed as primary: empiricism-experience and rationalism-thinking. The epistemological value of authority has been to corroborate the primary sources of knowledge.

This *de facto* analysis of knowledge has lulled our critical faculties to sleep by causing us to accept the idea that there are three sources of knowledge that are independent of any dogmatic-authoritative assumptions. Knowledge has to be gained by the use of man's sensory, rational, or intuitive powers with their correlative tests for truth of correspondence, coherence, and self-evidence. All authorities must be scrutinized by these cognitive capacities of man while the empirical-rational-intuitive sources are seen as non-authoritative. The problem of knowledge has been given an answer by the definition of sources.

Reflection reveals that the empirical, rational, and mystical sources of knowledge are based on non-demonstrable assumptions and are as dogmatic and authoritarian as authority. This is simply to assert that every epistemological system begins with non-demonstrable assumptions. These assumptions constitute a very real commitment to authority, although it is obscured by the use of language and by definition.

Man has faced the question of cognitive authority from Eden until the present. Adam sought epistemological independence from God in order to decide for himself whose word was true and thus authoritative. Satan, speaking through the serpent, asserted that the eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would not result in death but rather would yield an increment of knowledge and

an expanded vista of perception. God, on the other hand, asserted that eating would bring certain death. Adam faced the problem of conflicting truth claims. To determine which claim was the true and dependable guide for conduct, Adam established a third authority. He weighed the converging and diverging evidence for each hypothesis and thus became the final authority and standard for truth.

How should Adam have responded to this epistemological-ethical test? Is it possible to identify the words of God by a standard external to those words? The purpose of this article is to explore the apologetical value of the self-referential words of God.

#### THE CREDIBILITY OF REVELATION

##### *The issue*

The world is full of competing religions, all of which claim authority for their position. How does one go about testing claims to religious authority for truth value? This issue divides the community of the redeemed. The revelational rational-empiricist insists that all claims to religious authority must be tested the same way that all truth claims are tested, i.e., by the inductive scientific method. The Bible must be subjected to factual tests and will be shown to be true beyond reasonable doubt when checked by history, etc. Pinnock asserts: "Probability is the guide to life; it is the guide to religious truth, too."<sup>1</sup>

The second approach is an autopistic stance (i.e., worthy of faith in itself) which asserts that the self-testimony of Scripture is sufficient to establish its authority. Autopistic apologetics presupposes that the Bible is true and then argues from the Bible to show that it is authoritative. The seeds of authenticity are internal to the objective content of biblical revelation because it is God-breathed. The doctrine of Scripture must come from Scripture just as the doctrines of God, creation, providence, fall, redemption, and second coming must come from Scripture.

##### *The self-witness*

There would never be any basis for discussion about the authority of Scripture if the Bible did not claim authority for itself. The witness of the Bible to its own authority is both pervasive and readily accessible. There is no value in repeating the multiform pervasive

<sup>1</sup>C. H. Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation — The Foundation of Christian Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 46. Axiopists who have taken this view include C. S. Lewis, Frank Morrison, Wilbur Smith, James Orr, John Gerstner, Kenneth Kantzer, Daniel Fuller, John Warwick Montgomery, and Benjamin Warfield.

content of the Bible's witness to its own ultimate authority.<sup>2</sup> Scripture speaks clearly of its own origin, character, and authority. Is it possible to judge that Scripture is the ultimate criterion by the application of another criterion to establish it? I think not.

*Being and knowing.* God is the self-contained, triune, ontological God who has created heaven and earth. He created because he willed to and his all-comprehensive plan stands behind all of reality. As the creator, he is self-sufficient and is not ontologically correlative to his creation. By his eternal purpose he has willed whatsoever comes to pass (Acts 2:23; Eph 1:3-14). This God has revealed himself in his creation and providential care and specially through his Son and his Word, i.e., Scripture. Christ is the revelator of God, and apart from his self-revelation God would not be known. Given the ultimacy of God's being and his self-revelation, man is surrounded externally and internally with the revelation of the true God. God is only known through his own self-disclosure, and in light of this it would follow that God's revelation is self-attesting. What could there be that would be an adequate witness to attest God's revelation when he is the self-existing creator? What exists in reality that is not created by God and is not revelatory of him?

The very nature of the being of God necessitates that his self-revelation would have the evidence of its authority within itself. "The God who speaks in scripture cannot refer to anything that is not already authoritatively revelational of himself."<sup>3</sup> The quality of the being of God who exhaustively knows himself and his plan can be the only point of predication for human knowledge based on his self-revelation. The self-witness of Scripture is not just the foundation of authority for religious knowledge but for all knowledge.

Self-witness is necessary because of the uniqueness of the being of God. Murray well summarizes this idea when he writes:

It might seem analogous to the case of a judge who accepts the witness of the accused in his own defense, rather than evidence derived from all the relevant facts in the case. . . . It is fully admitted that normally it would be absurd and a miscarriage of justice for a judge to accept the testimony of the accused, rather than the verdict required by all the relevant evidence. But the two cases are not analogous. There is one sphere where self-testimony must be accepted as absolute and final.

<sup>2</sup>J. Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," *The Infallible Word*, ed. N. Stonehouse (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946) 17-40. Autopistic apologetes include John Calvin, Herman Bavinck, E. J. Young, Gordon Clark, Abraham Kuyper, John C. Whitcomb, Greg Bahnsen, and Robert Reymond.

<sup>3</sup>C. Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (n.p.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1967) 9.

This is the sphere of our relation to God. God alone is adequate witness to himself.<sup>4</sup>

*The value of self-witness.* The revelational axiom of the Christian faith in the witness of Scripture to itself brings a number of implications for apologetics. A true defense of Christianity demands the open communication of self-authenticating Scripture to man. Man must be challenged to study Scripture so that he will be confronted with its witness about God, creation, sin, man, Christ, and redemption. It would be fruitless to defend a self-authenticating Scripture by abstract non-scriptural argument. The value of that self-witness must be put to use in the careful enunciation of its content.<sup>5</sup> He must be challenged to total repentance and not the addition of a religious experience to his present mental set. Knowing that the Bible is true and authoritative is nothing but hearing and obeying the voice of God.

The communication of the redemptive revelation that is necessary, authoritative, clear, and sufficient would necessitate that we never allow a man to get into the position where he can judge what God has said or has not said. To allow the individual an extra-biblical standard to judge the credibility of Scripture implies that the sinner already knows what God can or cannot reveal.<sup>6</sup> This would be in clear contradiction to the biblical assertion of the necessity of revelation for man to know anything. Every fact in the universe is in dispute. To capitulate to the unregenerate demand for autonomy and submit the biblical revelation and its evidence to his viewpoint is to deny what Scripture says about him as a sinner whose mind is at enmity against God.

The internal evidence ought to be presented unashamedly from the starting point of the Bible as God's authoritative word. It ought to be presented with the force of an absolute demand and the prayer that God the Holy Spirit will open the blind eyes of the hearer so that he will see the overwhelming evidence and bow in repentance and faith. In his natural state the unregenerate man suppresses every aspect of God's natural and special revelation. The evidence in him, around him, and in Scripture is sufficient and final. There is no weakness in the evidence. The problem is that man cannot see. He doesn't need more evidence; he needs new birth. The living, abiding Word of God as self-attestingly sure, blessed by the regenerating activity of the Holy Spirit, is his only hope.

<sup>4</sup>Murray, "The Attestation of Scripture," 9, 10.

<sup>5</sup>J. Frame, "Scripture Speaks for Itself," *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. J. W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1974) 179.

<sup>6</sup>R. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 16.

## THE PROBLEM OF CIRCULAR REASONING

Revelational rational-empiricists have asserted that to accept the Bible as true based on its own witness is to reason in a circle and thus remove Christianity from the arena of intellectual credibility. Pinnock boldly asserts that the position of self-witness is nothing but fideism and puts it in the camp of neo-orthodoxy and mysticism.<sup>7</sup> The immediate point to be noted is that the argument has dealt with the objective content of revelation and not with subjective religious experience. The appeal to Scripture to validate the authority of Scripture is an appeal to an objective content that is God-breathed. Is it question-begging?

*Presuppositions are universal*

Every system has a self-referential starting point that cannot be validated by an authority. It must simply be accepted as self-referential. This starting point will have metaphysical implications as well as ethical implications. In the case of pure empiricism, the assumption is that what can be known by man must originate in sensory experience. All the generals of knowledge are inductive inferences from the plurality of sense experience. This epistemological authority implies that what is real is extended in time and space, and thus morals and values have no objective referent.

The point is obvious! All epistemological authorities start with linguistic assertions that are self-referential. From these starting points a circular world-life view is developed. Since Babel and its pluriform communication, multiple views vie for men's allegiance. Man in his rebellion against God does not agree on one system, but has multiple alternatives. All of his systems share one thing in common — that the claims of God in the Bible cannot be true. Agreement extends to the ultimacy of man and his capacities as the only tolerable starting point for knowledge. Ultimate authorities cannot be validated by appeals to other authorities, for then ultimacy is obviously lost. Sinful man, with his autonomous ultimacy, reasons in a vicious circle, the result of which is his own intellectual and moral suicide.

*A non-vicious circle*

"In the beginning, God . . ." (Gen 1:1). "God created man" (Gen 1:27). The ultimacy of the being of God necessitates that man's being

<sup>7</sup>Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation*, 42-44. For a careful refutation of Pinnock's charges, see G. L. Bahnsen, "Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism," *JETS* 20 (1977) 289-305.

is derived and dependent on God. No matter what he says or does, man is God's creature and is accessible to God. God has, by wise council and deliberation, foreordained all things that come to pass. He has revealed himself and his plan in a once-for-all, prophetic-apostolic revelation that he breathed out. God has exhaustive knowledge of himself and his plan, and thus his revelation is the basis for knowing in his created world. Man is God's creature and is dependent on God for knowledge through his self-revelation. The evidence for the truth of God's revelation is internal to the revelation and is adapted to man in language form. The right response of the creature is to believe and obey this revelation with thanksgiving. Sin has blinded the eyes of the creature. The gentle grace of the Holy Spirit opens his eyes to the light of God's revelation and he steps into the circle of truth. Knowledge can now be justified on the basis of the self-revealing God. Regenerate man can now explicate all the internal evidence of Scripture as his authority and confront the unbeliever with the Word of the living God.

— Sola Scriptura —