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EPISTEMOLOGY AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

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INTRODUCTION

Thesis: Before one is able to apply a theological method one must first develop a method of epistemology. Within all varieties of theological methods, there is one constant that cannot be ignored; the question of “is it real?” Unless one surrenders all evidential corroboration to something akin to Stephen Jay Gould’s “Non-overlapping magisteria,” where issues of religious and scientific truth are to remain quarantined from one another, the issue of epistemology is paramount.¹ In this paper, I will discuss the intersection of epistemology and theological method in the relationship between general and special revelation.

I. Epistemology via general revelation

A. Scientific theories and theological certainty

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy reads, “Contemporary epistemology of religion may conveniently be treated as a debate over whether *evidentialism* applies to the belief-component of religious faith or whether we should instead adopt a more permissive epistemology. Here evidentialism is the initially plausible position that a belief is justified only if “it is proportioned to the evidence.”² Even within the debate on evidentialism, as to whether a particular set of evidence warrants belief religious belief, the importance of presuppositions cannot be overstated.

For example, how one interprets the discovery of the DNA code within the cell as evidence for design or simply another brick in the edifice of Darwinian evolution based upon random processes, has much to do with one’s presuppositions. In favor of Intelligent Design,

¹ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 5-6.

² Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Epistemology,” March 11, 2009. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religion-epistemology/> Accessed May 2, 2012.

William Dembski, argues, “The aim of this book then is to show how detecting design within the universe, and especially against the backdrop of biology and biochemistry, unseats naturalism.”³

Contra-Dembski, Richard Dawkins counters, “One of the greatest challenges to the human intellect, over the centuries, has been to explain how the complex, improbable appearance of design in the universe arises.”⁴ Dawkins seeks to diffuse the assault of Intelligent Design upon Darwinism with a parrying blow that interpretation of apparent evidence of design within biology must resist, “the natural temptation . . . to attribute the appearance of design to actual design itself.”⁵ This is not to argue that one’s worldview always unrecognizably mars the evidence, because evidence can certainly change worldviews. However, one’s presuppositions have an incredible impact upon one’s intellectual inclinations when initially examining the evidence.

The placebo effect is a well-documented medical phenomenon. Numerous studies have shown that religious practice by and large produce positive effects in practitioners. Certainly the power of the mind is such that it can effect physiological changes. Yet, the question is whether the benefits of religious practice are merely the result of subjective mental states or whether there is an external reality. The Randolph C. Byrd experiment is famous for demonstrating, “The therapeutic effects of intercessory prayer (IP) to the Judeo-Christian God, [as] one of the oldest forms of therapy,” in light of it receiving, “little attention in the medical literature.”⁶ Upon completion of the double-blind experiment, Byrd concludes, “In this study I have attempted to

³ William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 14.

⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; 2008), 157.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Randolph C. Byrd, “Positive Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer in a Coronary Care Unit Population,” *Southern Medical Journal*, July, 1988. Vol. 81, No. 7.

determine whether intercessory prayer to the Judeo-Christian God has any effect on the medical condition and recovery of hospitalized patients. I further have attempted to measure any effects, if present, of those prayers. Based on these data there seemed to be an effect, and that effect was presumed to be beneficial.”⁷ Such a study raises the question of the epistemological question of whether the universe is an open or closed system.

For the purposes of this paper, the question of the relation of science to theology has a direct influence upon theological method. If theological dogma automatically trumps the undisputed scientific fact without investigation, then theology would necessarily be sliding into fideism. On the other hand, if the only material theology has to work with is that which is scientifically verified, a constantly assuaging body of knowledge in itself, theology is little more than a scientific theory or formula. Such a position is practically Scientism.

William Lane Craig quotes the scientism of W.V.O. Quine, “If I saw indirect explanatory benefit in positing sensibilia, possibilia, spirits, a Creator, I would joyfully accord them scientific status too, on a par with such avowedly scientific posits as quarks and black holes.”⁸ Craig responds, “*Scientism is self-refuting*. Scientism tells us that we should not believe any proposition that cannot be scientifically proven. But what about that very proposition itself? It cannot itself be scientifically proven. Therefore we should not believe it. Scientism thus defeats itself.”⁹ As Craig goes on to demonstrate that admonitions to exclusively reserve the label of “knowledge” for only what is within the scientific realm is, in itself, not a scientific statement; it

⁷ Ibid, 829.

⁸ W.V.O. Quine, “Naturalism; or, Living within One’s Means,” *Dialectica* 49 (1995): 252. Cited in, William Lane Craig, “Is Scientism Self-Refuting?” <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-scientism-self-refuting> Accessed May 6, 2012.

⁹ William Lane Craig, “Is Scientism Self-Refuting?” <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/is-scientism-self-refuting> Accessed May 6, 2012.

is a philosophical claim. Thus, the claim that the only sound epistemological grounds for theological method are reserved for the scientifically verified cannot be scientifically verified.

Yet if theological method is ultimately concerned about interpreting the body of truth once delivered to the saints then it must take into account the relation between science and theology. First, the understanding that science and theology are diametrically opposed is a false dichotomy. While Richard Dawkins and others within the “New Atheists” camp, argue that Christianity is the mortal enemy of science. There is nothing in Scripture that supports such a position. In fact, one can make a strong case that it was actually Judeo-Christian monotheism that provided the intellectual framework for the possibility of scientific thought. Rodney Stark notes:

What the great figures involved in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century blossoming of science—including Descartes, Galileo, Newton, and Kepler—did confess was their absolute faith in a creator God, whose work incorporated rational rules awaiting discovery. The rise of science was not an extension of classical learning. It was the natural outgrowth of Christian doctrine: nature exists because it was created by God. In order to love and honor God, it is necessary to fully appreciate the wonders of his handiwork. Because God is perfect, his handiwork functions in accord with *immutable principles*. By the full use of our God-given powers of reason and observation, it ought to be possible to discover these principles. These were the crucial ideas that explain why science arose in Christian Europe and nowhere else.”¹⁰

Thus, without a Christian framework grounded upon a God of order, science would have no grounding point in a world believed to be governed by magic spells and mysticism. If mysticism is the enemy of science, then Christianity is the friend of science because Christianity opposed whatever opposes discovering more of God’s creation. Kenneth Samples illustrates this crucial point, “Because the world is not divine and therefore not a proper object of worship, it

¹⁰ Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), 22-23.

can be an object of rational study and empirical observation.”¹¹ One quickly notices Craig, Stark, and Samples base their conclusions upon one central premise; that God does indeed exist, a premise that is well-supported by the evidence.

So who should hold the hierarchy in the relationship between science and theology? First, science presupposes rationality and the laws of logic.¹² Without a rational universe, science would be impossible. Second, science is a tool to understand the natural world but is unable to trace the cause of the universe in the time before time when the universe, and matter itself, was not. The Kalam Cosmological Argument is particularly helpful here: 1) Whatever begins to exist has a cause, 2) The universe began to exist, 3) Therefore, a cause of the universe exists.¹³ Unless one holds to an eternal universe, which only pushes the question back one step, one must concede that the initial cause of the universe, the bringing matter into existence (e.g., creation *ex nihilo*), is most probably beyond the bounds of scientific inquiry because science can only examine what “is.” P.C.W. Davies portrays the scenario as follows:

If we extrapolate this prediction to its extreme, we reach a point when all distances in the universe have shrunk to zero. An initial cosmological singularity therefore forms a past temporal extremity to the universe. We cannot continue physical reasoning, or even the concept of spacetime, through such an extremity. For this reason most cosmologists think of the initial singularity as the beginning of the universe. On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.¹⁴

Hence, science is an effective tool, albeit not the only tool, for discovering the intricacies

¹¹ Kenneth Samples, *Without a Doubt* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 193. Quoted in, Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 103.

¹² William Lane Craig & Peter Atkins, *What is the Evidence For/Against the Existence of God*, William F. Buckley Jr., Moderator (1998; Norcross, GA: Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, 2006.), DVD.

¹³ William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 96.

¹⁴ P.C.W. Davies, “Spacetime Singularities in Cosmology,” in *The Study of Time III*, ed. J.T. Fraser (Berlin: Springer Verlag, 1978), 78-79. Quoted in, William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 126.

of the created order of the universe but is insufficient in determining the initial cause of the universe.¹⁵ Other reasons against strictly evaluating theological truths by the scientific method is that most theological claims, except claims of design and creation of animals “according to their kind”¹⁶ (Gen. 1:20-25), fall outside of the scientific method. Questions of beauty, sin, righteousness, ethics, and love cannot be found in or quantified by a test tube.

One may subsequently inquire as to how possible contradictions between accepted scientific theory and theological claims in Scripture are to be interpreted. One approach is to “demythologize” the Bible and avoid any conclusion that biblical claims that are either supernatural or out of conformity with modernity.¹⁷ Such an approach is neither necessary nor scientifically adept. A brief survey of the history and philosophy of science provides one irrefutable fact: scientific theories are fluid given the advance of scientific discoveries. As Kevin Vanhoozer notes, “In the self-assured world of modernity people seek to make sense of the Scriptures, instead of hoping, with the aid of the Scriptures, to make some sense of themselves.”¹⁸

Therefore, building one’s theological grounds and subsequently one’s theological method, upon particular scientific theories is, at best, naïve. For example, the discovery of quantum mechanics and the present observation that, at the deepest sub-atomic level, probabilities, not certainties, are the order of the day. Free Will and Molinist theologians see

¹⁵ This is, unless, as has been previously noted, one adheres to a strict materialism akin to Carl Sagan’s opening line of *Cosmos*, “The cosmos is all that there ever was or ever will be.” *Cosmos*, directed by Carl Sagan (1980; Cosmos Studios, 2002), DVD.

¹⁶ See, Stephen Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).

¹⁷ See, Rudolph Bultmann, *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, Schubert M. Ogden, translator & editor (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press: 2005), 20.

such discoveries, taken together with the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, as a theological goldmine for extricating the age-old quandary of the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God and the responsibility and choices of human moral agents.¹⁹ The observation that prediction of the movement of quantum particles can only be made in terms of probabilities, for some theologians, presents a possible argument that even within the fabric of the physical universe that all results are not certain. However, most theologians would also have to conclude that, at its furthest extent, the miniscule activity of quantum theory does not affect macro-events. Ultimately, this question delves into the labyrinth of presuppositions.

B. Epistemological Presuppositions

If miracles are possible, one can make the argument that what can be known is not always contained within the parameters of strict, natural laws. Since the Enlightenment, the overwhelming presupposition in the West is that the universe is a closed system, thus, rendering miracles categorically impossible. The influence of David Hume, possibly the most influential philosopher on miracles and religious epistemology, is considered to have nailed the proverbial

¹⁹ The revolutionary formulation of quantum theory is encapsulated in the statement: One striking aspect of the difference between classical and quantum physics is that whereas classical mechanics presupposes that exact simultaneous values can be assigned to all physical quantities, quantum mechanics denies this possibility, the prime example being the position and momentum of a particle. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, "The Uncertainty Principle" July 3, 2006 <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/qt-uncertainty/#UncRelUncPri> Accessed May 7, 2012. It was this very theory of uncertainty that clashed with Einstein who "raised serious objections. He believed that a fundamental theory should predict precise values, not averages. Einstein and Neils Bohr argued about the validity of Heisenberg's ideas for the rest of their lives. The issue was philosophical, not experimental, because Heisenberg's methods worked very well in practical electronic calculations. The argument was over the question of principle. Was uncertainty merely a part of Heisenberg's method, which would someday be replaced by a more accurate method, or was it a fundamental fact of nature? Einstein argued against uncertainty as an underlying principle of the universe: "I shall never believe that God plays dice with the world.'" Peter D. Skiff, *Science and Scientists*, Vol. 2 (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2006), 435. It must also be noted that Reformed theologians, who, by and large, more receptive to determinism and, thus, have not grasped at the possibility of quantum mechanics as a possible breakthrough in the alleged tension between the foreordination of God and the question for moral agents: Could I have chosen otherwise or was I determined to choose what I chose? However, Christian theologians of all stripes do have a stake in how quantum theory could provide a scientific argument for the possibility of miracles within the physical order.

nail into the coffin of the possibility of miracles, e.g., the resurrection of Christ. The fulcrum of Hume's epistemological methodology is captured in the statement:

If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.²⁰

Hume follows up with the inevitable outcome of such an epistemological methodology; an outcome not realized by many theologians who committed themselves to Hume's empiricism. Hume foresaw that to disallow the miraculous as a possibility, one has only naturalistic interpretations of seemingly unusual events. Although the limits of this paper will not allow for a full-scale response to Hume, it would be a disservice to the discussion if there were no mention of Craig Keener's shattering rebuttal to Hume. In a devastating 1172 page critique of Hume's anti-supernaturalism, Keener provides not only a knock-down philosophical rebuttal, an extremely rare anomaly in philosophical exchanges, but in addition, provides an unprecedented academic treatise on the subject of miracles. Contra Hume, Keener argues that Hume's argument against miracles is deductive.²¹ Keener notes:

Hume argues that no evidence in principle can be sufficient to compel belief in miracles, his claim might succeed to the extent that the evaluator of the evidence held tenaciously to antimiraculous presuppositions, but is not logically necessary if the evaluator is genuinely open-minded on the question . . . he argues from nature's uniformity against miracles, which is the point in question. He generalizes from the alleged lack of good testimony for miracles to exclude what may in fact be good testimony for miracles.²² Essentially, Keener charges Hume with playing with epistemologically loaded dice.

Hume's epistemological standards forego an open investigation of the evidence and

²⁰ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Vol. XXXVII, Part 3. The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1914), np.

²¹ Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 143.

²² *Ibid.*

commit the age-old fallacy of begging the question. Furthermore, as Keener identifies, Hume's appeal to "'uniform experience" involved passive recollection of a sequence of events known to oneself and possibly one's colleagues, and no more."²³ Hume's geographical and cultural isolation as a Scottish scholar in the 17th century is almost laughable by 21st century standards of international interaction. Kenner's exploitation of the chink in Hume's armor is valid and almost embarrassing for Humeans because it leads one to the conclusion that the wreckage of modern theological theories are due to a logical slip avoided by all intellectually nimble philosophers: the fallacy of making absolute conclusions based upon epistemological premises that are extremely limited.

As previously mentioned, Rudolph Bultmann led the charge to "demythologize" not only the New Testament but also entire corpus of Christianity. Bultmann's stated purpose for his theological methodology was to make Christianity acceptable to modern man. His explanation is as follows:

The purpose of demythologizing is not to make religion more acceptable to modern man by trimming the traditional Biblical texts, but to make clearer to modern man what the Christian faith is. He must be confronted with the issue of decision, be provoked to decision by the fact that the stumbling-block to faith, the *skandalon*, is peculiarly disturbing to man in general, not only to modern man (modern man being only one species of man). Therefore my attempt to demythologize begins, true enough, by clearing away the false stumbling-blocks created for modern man by the fact that his world-view is determined by science.²⁴

In Bultmann's own words he sought to deliver Christianity from itself. The real question is whether Christianity needs to be adjusted to fit the "scientific" worldview of modern man or whether the aforementioned scientific worldview should be the patient of an epistemological readjustment. What Bultmann fails to recognize is that the scientific worldview of Western

²³ Ibid, 147-148.

²⁴ Rudolph Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate* Vol. 2. Austen Farrer, Hans Werner Bartsch, editors (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1953), 182-183.

modernity is not representative of the larger community of mankind. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated, the definitions of what classifies as “science” are constantly shifting.

Recent theories have shaken the very foundations of Darwinism and naturalism, long held to be pillars in the scientific world.²⁵ In attempting to demythologize Christianity and thus remove barriers to its acceptance, Bultmann did the exact opposite. Craig Keener notes, “Bultmann, however, unwittingly excluded from the modern world the majority of the world’s population, as I shall illustrate, in a manner that current sensitivities would regard as inexcusably ethnocentric . . . Bultmann’s perspective was not a result of biblical scholarship per se but of a particular philosophic epistemology.”²⁶ Likewise, Walter Wink carries a stinging indictment for Bultmannians of all stripes, where he writes, “People with an attenuated sense of what is possible will bring that conviction to the Bible and diminish it by the poverty of their own experience.”²⁷ Such is the demise of Bultmann’s unnecessary Humean epistemological restrictions. David Strauss who went so far as to deny virtually every facet of New Testament historicity due to alleged “mythical elements,” illustrates the ripple effect of Hume’s influence.²⁸

Theologians are not the only ones leading the shift away from the crumbling edifice of naturalism. David Brooks writes:

The atheism debate is a textbook example of how a scientific revolution can change public culture. Just as “The Origin of Species” reshaped social thinking, just as Einstein’s theory of relativity affected art, so the revolution in neuroscience is having an effect on

²⁵ See, Michael Behe, *Darwin’s Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* 2nd ed. (New York: Free Press, 2006).

²⁶ Craig Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 8.

²⁷ Walter Wink, “Write What You See: An Odyssey” Fourth R. Volume 7,3 (May 1994): 3-9.

²⁸ William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 218. Yarchin quotes Strauss, “By the term “myth” Strauss meant “the representation of an event or of an idea in a form which is historical, but at the same time characterized by the rich pictorial and imaginative mode of thought and expression of the primitive ages.” David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1892), 53. Quoted in William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, *ibid*.

how people see the world . . . Over the past several years, the momentum has shifted away from hard-core materialism. The brain seems less like a cold machine. It does not operate like a computer. Instead, meaning, belief and consciousness seem to emerge mysteriously from idiosyncratic networks of neural firings. Those squishy things called emotions play a gigantic role in all forms of thinking. Love is vital to brain development.²⁹

Henceforth, any theological method that has *a priori* commitment to naturalism begs the question and, thus, does not qualify as a sound theological method. Even though all persons have some amount of bias, stacking the deck against data that challenge one's epistemological sources is unbecoming to serious academicians.

C. Logic and orthodoxy

A biblically sound epistemology in theological method is not opposed to logic. Atheists have often charged the Christian position with being logically inconsistent. For example, J.L. Schellenberg holds that the alleged silence and hiddenness of God is proof of His non-existence. Schellenberg writes, if God, as a maximally great being, actually exists then he would “ensure that everyone capable of such belief (or at any rate, everyone capable who was not disposed to resist it) was in possession of sufficient evidence to bring it about that such belief was formed.”³⁰ Schellenberg's charge against theism fails because of an assumed, but invalid presupposition, that requires “sufficient evidence” to essentially be coercive. Furthermore, it reveals a flawed anthropology (an assumed naturalism), wherein persons are always persuaded by evidence as opposed to many persons whose intellects are bound by biases, emotions, and past experiences. One would have to assume, given the existence of God that the vast chasm between human and divine knowledge and reasoning would inevitably result in certain aspects of God being hidden

²⁹ David Brooks, “The Neural Buddhists” *The New York Times*, May 13, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/13/opinion/13brooks.html> Accessed May 8, 2012.

³⁰ J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 2.

from human cognition. Not only does Schellenberg, and other atheists, fail to demonstrate how the hiddenness of God accounts to conclusive evidence against His existence but also twists the laws of logic by arbitrarily determining the nature and persuasiveness of the evidence. The Apostle Paul goes so far as to claim that to know (γινῶναι) the love of Christ is to know that which τὴν ὑπερβάλλουσαν τῆς γνώσεως and the “surpassing” of knowledge carries the idea of “to attain a degree that extraordinarily exceeds a point on a scale of extent, *go beyond, surpass, outdo*” (Eph. 3:19).³¹ The following purpose clause and resulting phrase, ἵνα πληρωθῆτε εἰς πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ θεοῦ, point to the filling of God, something that cannot be contained by human understanding, as the result of experiencing the love of Christ, which is not naturally intelligible to human understanding (Eph. 3:19). Paul follows with an exhortation to trust God who is able to do, ὑπερεκπερισσοῦ, and a term connoting “the highest form of comparison imaginable,”³² wherein the reference point of exceeding is all human requests and thinking, ὧν αἰτούμεθα ἢ νοοῦμεν. Therefore, a sound epistemology within a theological method must be a denial of the human ability to fully comprehend the depths of theological knowledge or the “why” of the ways of God. If one lesson is to be learned from Hume it is that absolute judgments should not be made with limited data.

II. Special revelation

A. Experience, Subjectivism & Certainty

Vanhoozer warns, “In the United States, most mainline Protestant and progressive Catholic theology has landed in the graveyard of dogmatics, which is that mode of thinking George Lindbeck calls “experiential expressivism.” Individuals and groups vent their own

³¹ Frederick William Danker & William F. Arndt, & Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1032.

³² Ibid, 1033.

religious experience and call it theology.”³³ If one’s theological method does not make room for the leading of the Holy Spirit then, while one may assent to the authority or even the inerrancy of Scripture, then a plethora of New Testament texts that speak of “walking in the Spirit” must be categorically ignored.³⁴ Yet the danger of associating one’s emotions with the leading of the Holy Spirit, a sort of hijacked emotionalism, must be guarded against. While being led by the Holy Spirit must conform to the Scripture already been inspired by the Spirit, one can safely discard all such sensations a person may experience that will lead them to disobey the plain teachings of Scripture. Throughout the Bible, numerous examples of the Spirit’s leading, even upon detailed study, would be extremely difficult to quantify as a strict, formula-based theological method. One can conduct a post-event exegesis of Phillip being led to the Ethiopian or Ananias obeying the vision to meet with Saul, the persecutor of the church. Yet in the actual instance, they had little to go on other than an experience that may not precisely fit into the Western category of what is considered to be rational or even normal religious behavior. The temptation for even orthodox Western theologians is to reject what may not fit into the pattern of a normalized, Western rubric of Christian behavior as aberrant behavior for Christians. With that being said, an important note here is that one should be extremely careful in making exegetical arguments such as the pattern in Acts should always serve as a textbook for being led by the Spirit. Even within the book of Acts there is a wide variety of experiences upon which would be very difficult to establish an absolute rule.

How should one decipher the epistemologically grounded leading of the Holy Spirit in the application of a sound theological method? Simply put, obedience to the clear ethical and

³³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 17.

³⁴ John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-15; Acts 8:29, 9:31, 10:29, 16:6-7; Rom. 8:26, 15:13; 1 Cor. 2:13, 12:3; Gal. 5:22.

missional teachings of Christ provide a healthy environment for the leading of the Spirit. For a believer to be in compliance with, for example, the call of Christ to make disciples of all nations, one, thus, enables one to be led by the Spirit on the “how” of the “what.”³⁵

B. Living by the Spirit & Faith

Orthodox theologians readily attest to the reality of a believer being enabled by the Holy Spirit to epistemologically “know” not just certain spiritual realities but physical realities that have not yet occurred. The question in light of this paper is how exactly the believer has certainty that they are being led by the Holy Spirit into truth rather than being the victim of a fluctuating, emotional experientialism. Vanhoozer portrays a distinctive comparison, “If theology is a matter of understanding how to participate rightly/correctly/fittingly in the dramatic action, then doctrine is a statement of what is, of what has already been done (by God), and of what remains to be done (by God and by me/us).”³⁶ Thus, a believer can be epistemologically warranted in “knowing” certain things through the Spirit not detectable through other methods.

The concept of knowledge in the New Testament is incredibly intriguing. To truly know something is not in the same sense of mere categorical knowledge. Rather, it is to know and thus, to experience. For the New Testament writers, knowledge does not operate within a vacuum. A sound theological method must take several factors into account in exegeting the concept of knowledge in the New Testament. First, mankind, although spiritually dead to the life of God through the Holy Spirit, is able to recognize the existence of and moral law of God through nature and the conscience (Rom. 1:18-22, 2:14-16). Romans 1:19 reads, διότι τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ

³⁵ Unbelief and disobedience restrains the interaction of the power of the Spirit (Mark 6:5).

³⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 94.

θεοῦ φανερόν ἐστὶν ἐν αὐτοῖς ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἐφάνερωσεν. Paul is arguing that the human composition, the *imago dei*, although damaged by an inherited sin nature is capable of a certain level of knowledge about the existence of God. The word, γνωστὸν, most often translated “know” has to do with “being able to be known, capable of being known, intelligible.”³⁷ What God has shown is the outward witness of design in nature and the inward witness of the conscience (Rom. 2:15). Second, the knowing of spiritual realities is grasped only through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit and walking in the power thereof (1 Cor. 2:14). Verse 14b reads, μωρία γὰρ αὐτῷ ἐστὶν καὶ οὐ δύναται γινῶναι, ὅτι πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται. The apparent foolishness, μωρία, of the things of God and the inability of the soulish man, ψυχικὸς δὲ ἄνθρωπος, to accept spiritual things is because he does not have the Holy Spirit. Having the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is vitally necessary to understanding spiritual the things of God because those realities are, πνευματικῶς ἀνακρίνεται. The word for “discerned/understood” ἀνακρίνεται, connotes the idea of one who is committed “to engage in careful study of a question, [to] examine.”³⁸ According to this key text, one can have an inner connection with spiritual truths that is not in opposition to the proper functioning of the intellect. Given the existence of God, only the functioning of a regenerate mind wholly obedient to God can truly be classified as thinking properly. If God is the source of all goodness and from whose intelligent mind stems the order and rationale embedded within the universe, then one’s mind would necessarily have to be in compliance with God and His laws to avoid what would ultimately culminate into an intellectual malfunction.

Rather, one may argue from Paul’s writings, that while one is unregenerate, the thinking

³⁷ Frederick William Danker & William F. Arndt, & Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 204.

³⁸ Ibid, 66.

process is profoundly skewed. The unregenerate mind is disconnected from the life of the Spirit and, hence, stuck in a cycle that does not place obedience to the transcendent reality of God in preeminence.

If then, one can have confidence in the existence of God through the rational processes of human observation then where does that leave room for faith? While one may recognize and even believe in the existence of God, placing one's faith in God is a different matter altogether. Historical, scientific, and logical attestations to biblical truth can remove certain intellectual barriers to faith but without an act of the will wherein one places trust of their entire person in the person of Jesus Christ, they will remain enlightened, but unregenerate. So as to avoid confusion, the role of evidence in biblical epistemology must not be considered an enemy of faith. Nothing could be further from the truth. Evidence is not an enemy of faith but the ally of faith. Even in the Old Testament, the refrain of "so that they may know that I am God," echoes through the narratives (Is. 46:9).

Imagine if God had never revealed Himself as God to the Israelites. It is one thing to look back upon the biblical narratives and have faith in the message that God sent through Moses and the prophets. It is another thing altogether to be required to believe the word of a returning exile whose legitimacy, as a servant of God is even in question. From revelations of evidential knowledge on a personal basis, such as Joseph's dream and ability to interpret dreams, to the cataclysmic events such as the ten plagues in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea, God has never required persons to step out in faith in the absence of evidence (Gen. 37:5-7; Ex. 7-11, 14). The quintessential case once the nation of Israel had been firmly established in the Promised Land was Elijah's challenge to the Baal-worshipping Israelites and their pagan priests, "And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who

answers by fire, he is God.” And all the people answered, “It is well spoken” (1 Kings 18:24). Not only is there no indication within this narrative that God’s miraculous act of consuming the sacrifices was out of fashion. In fact, from a brief survey in the Old Testament, one could make the argument that the miraculous was God’s *modus operandi*. Therefore, a demonstration of signs of power accompanying the divine message of the Old Testament messengers, enabled the hearers to make a decision based upon epistemologically sound premises.

It must also be noted, that although God provided instances of such power that demonstrated His sovereignty, this is not always the case. In fact, Jesus even eschewed the requests for “signs” as telltale signs of wicked hearts. Upon delivering a scathing indictment against the Pharisees, they subsequently requested a sign from Jesus (Matt. 12:33-38, ESV). Jesus’ response is somewhat enigmatic, “But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah”” (Matt. 12:39, ESV). In one sense Jesus denounces the desire for a sign, which should be understood as something akin to a petty magician’s trick, only to reference a greater sign by way of the commonly accepted story of Jonah within 1st century Palestinian Judaism. Pfeiffer and Harrison explain, “What they wanted was some sensational deed in keeping with their ideas of Messiah (cf. Mt 16:1), a sign that would require no faith, only sight.”³⁹ Clearly the reference to Jonah is an allusion to Jesus’ impending death and resurrection. In one statement Jesus swats down the attempt to exploit His power with petty requests for petty signs and yet at the same time points to the sign of all signs; the resurrection of the Son of God.

What Jesus seems to be establishing is two-fold: First, the kingdom of God does not hinge upon signs, powerful as they may be, that merely satisfy the fleshly desire for

³⁹ Charles F. Pfeiffer, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: New Testament*, ed. Everett F. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), in *Logos Library System* [CD-ROM].

entertainment or scratch a whimsical intellectual itch (Matt. 16:1-4). Second, the corpus of *heilsgeschichte* holds much more persuasive power than paltry signs (Lk. 16:31). According to Jesus, the testimony of the law and the prophets is more persuasive than if a person rose from the dead (Lk. 16:31). Faith, then, is much closer to the genus of logical conclusions drawn from historical and moral testimonies rather than the result of an experiential sensationalism (incredibly, even in the case of a person rising from the dead). Third, God is willing to meet any legitimate request for evidence (Jn. 20:24-29). Referring to “Doubting Thomas,” Gary Habermas writes, “Although Jesus did provide the requested evidence, He also issued a mild rebuke to His apostle. It would have been better if Thomas had believed the testimony of the other apostles who reported to him that they had seen Jesus alive (Jn. 20:29), the same witness that we read in the New Testament.”⁴⁰ This narrative shows that Jesus is anything but capricious or unreasonably by requiring blind faith in the teeth of evidence.⁴¹ Fourth, while miracles and the bulk of attested historical evidence of the Law and the Prophets establish an environment conducive to faith, it does not guarantee faith (Jn. 20:30-31). Notice that the ἵνα purpose clause, ταῦτα δὲ γέγραπται ἵνα πιστεύ[ς]ητε ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, is connected both to the ἄλλα σημεῖα ἐποίησεν, of verse 30 and the resulting act of believing, πιστεύ[ς]ητε, that is inextricably linked to the ἵνα purpose clause of the latter half of verse 31, καὶ ἵνα πιστεύοντες ζῶν ἔχητε ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι αὐτοῦ. Hence, having life is dependent upon belief in Jesus as the Christ, and the decision to believe is predicated by divinely inspired σημεῖα; the

⁴⁰ Gary Habermas, *The Thomas Factor* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 7.

⁴¹ Richard Dawkins qualifies as one of the prolific propagators of the false definition of faith as, “the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.” *Root of All Evil?* Richard Dawkins (Arlington, VA: The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, 2006), DVD.

closest element to empirically verifiable evidence necessary to establishing a sound epistemology within the context of the first century.

Without going further, there is the framework for a sound theological method within the opening of the Gospel of John and the close of chapter 20; Evidence is used to support a presupposition, although the presuppositions of the Gospel writers were all changed through evidence, from which hearers are challenged to volitionally believe not simply in the evidence but in the person who the evidence points to.

The next question revolves around the mechanism of what specifically makes the leap from data to decision. William Yarchin comments:

The simple answer is that faith is a gift of God's grace. It is an attitude, born in us by the Holy Spirit, of trust in the promises of God relating to the efficacy of Christ's life, death and resurrection on our behalf. It is a gift in that we cannot, by our unaided will, exercise it. Yet it is a subjective thing, for we do exercise it and are fully conscious of doing so. The Bible says much about unbelief or lack of faith. It also says and implies much about the bondage of the human will when in rebellion against God. It thus points to two things with regard to faith: the inability of the sinner, and the need for the regeneration of the Holy Spirit if the sinner is to be made able to have faith . . . *the principle of 'faith alone' points us to the ontological inability of the sinner and the epistemological priority of the Holy Spirit.*⁴²

Hence, the witness of the Holy Spirit is the crucial factor in persons truly understanding the ramifications of the spiritual realities connected to the epistemological foundations of the gospel narratives. Henceforth, a sound theological method must rely upon and allow for the work of the Holy Spirit in the grasping of the spiritual truths contained in Scripture. Laura Garcia writes:

Union with God is primarily a union of wills, so entering into His life means coming to will what He wills, in preference to what we ourselves will. Because of original sin and our own personal sins, we tend to seek ourselves and to find our good in creatures rather than God, so the process of unification is also a process of purification. We must be

⁴² Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 49-50.

detached from creatures in order to be fully united to God.⁴³

This detachment from self and attachment to God, upon regeneration, requires obedience on the part of the believer to the clear teachings of Scripture in order to decipher the less clear. However, this is not to say that there must be absolute and total conformity of Christian belief on every area of theological minutia. While there are certain non-negotiables that comprise the fundamentals of Christian orthodoxy even Paul leaves certain practices up to one's conscience.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated that scientific discoveries can bolster theological claims but are not superior over theological claims. Naturalism must be proven before supernatural accounts are dismissed *a priori*. That an unbiased standard of epistemology must allow for the possibility of the supernatural has been shown to be necessary. Furthermore, the spiritual realities of the Christian faith are not against sound reasoning or logic, only that they surpass human intellect in that human finiteness does not have the inherent capacity to fully understand the ways of God. It has also been demonstrated that the ultimate grounding point of a biblical epistemology is the application of the truths of Scripture by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, human sin twists and blinds the human intellect so that it cannot understand the greater spiritual realities of Scripture. It is only when these factors are firmly established that they can be organized into a working theological method.

⁴³ Laura L. Garcia, *St. John of the Cross and the Necessity of Divine Hiddenness*, eds. Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89.

⁴⁴ 1 Cor. 10:29; Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16.

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