

**Without Excuse:**

*Scripture, Reason, and  
Presuppositional Apologetics*

Edited by  
David Haines



Copyright © 2020 The Davenant Press  
All rights reserved.

ISBN: 1-949716-03-1

ISBN-13: 978-1-949716-03-0

Cover design by Rachel Rosales, Orange Peel Design



## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

**J. T. Bridges** (PhD, Southern Evangelical Seminary) is the Academic Dean and Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Southern Evangelical Seminary. Bridges' current academic interests include: the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas, philosophy of science, and important issues subsumed under the philosophy of religion. He has authored a number of articles in the *Christian Apologetics Journal*. J.T. is married to Serena, with whom he has four children.

**Travis James Campbell** (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is a history teacher at Deerfield-Windsor School in Albany, GA. He also serves as a ruling elder at Northgate Presbyterian Church.

**Winfried Corduan** (PhD, Rice University) is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Religion at Taylor University. Winfried has published numerous articles and a dozen or so books, including *Handmaid to Theology: An Essay in Philosophical Prolegomena*, *No Doubt About It: The Case for Christianity*, *In the Beginning God: A Fresh Look at the Case for Original Monotheism*, and *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*. He is listed in *Who's Who in America*, and Performs folk music on StreetJelly.com on most Thursday nights at 9 pm Eastern.

**John DePoe** (PhD, University of Iowa) is the academic dean of the Schools of Logic and Rhetoric at Kingdom Preparatory Academy, Lubbock Texas. He is the author of numerous articles in journals such as *Philosophia Christi*, *Ratio*, and the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*. He has also contributed to numerous collaborative books. He specializes in epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of religion.

**John R. Gilhooly** (PhD, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) is the assistant professor of philosophy and theology, and director of the honors program, at Cedarville University. His doctoral dissertation, titled "Angelic Assumption of the Body in Thomas Aquinas and Scripture," was a defense of Aquinas's angelology. His research interests are the history of philosophy

(esp. medieval), the philosophy of religion (esp. the problem of evil), and the philosophy of love and sex (esp. gender and marriage).

**Nathan Greeley** (PhD, Claremont Graduate University) is currently an adjunct professor of philosophy at Indiana Wesleyan University in the College of Adult and Professional Studies. His research interests include the relationship between faith and reason, and the history of natural theology and Christian apologetics, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

**David Haines** (PhD, Université Laval) lives with his wife and their four children in Québec. He is associate professor of philosophy and religion at Veritas International University, associate professor of ethics at Séminaire Baptiste Évangélique du Québec, and has taught history of Christian Apologetics at FTE-Acadia. He is also the founding president of Association Axiome, an association of French Evangelical scholars, and the Christian Philosophy and Apologetics Center. He has published a number of articles on natural theology and co-authored a book on natural law. His academic research focuses on ancient and medieval metaphysics, C. S. Lewis, Thomism, and natural theology.

**Kurt Jaros** (PhD in progress, University of Aberdeen) is the Executive Director of Defenders Media and host of the Veracity Hill podcast. He is currently a PhD student studying the doctrine of original sin in the writings of monks from southern France in the fifth and sixth centuries. He holds a Master's degree in Christian Apologetics from Biola University, and a Master's degree in Systematic Theology, from King's College London. He currently resides in the suburbs of Chicago with his lovely wife and two daughters.

**M. Dan Kemp** (PhD in progress, Baylor University) has a BA in Politics, Philosophy and Economics from The King's College (NY) and an MA in Philosophy from Georgia State University. He currently lives in Waco, Texas with his wife and two children while he studies philosophy at Baylor University.

**Bernard James Mauser** (PhD, Marquette University) has written for various conservative think tanks, and he currently teaches at both Southern

Evangelical Seminary and Liberty University. He was formerly a funded scholar at the Acton Institute. He is the author of a book on the Bible called *Reading to Grow*.

**Joseph Minich** (PhD, The University of Texas at Dallas) is a Teaching Fellow with The Davenant Institute. The founding editor of *Ad Fontes*, he is also the author of *Enduring Divine Absence* and the editor of several volumes with The Davenant Press. Currently, he is host of the *Pilgrim Faith* podcast and a regular contributor for *Modern Reformation*. He lives in Garland, Texas, with his wife and four children.

**Andrew Payne** (PhD in progress, Southern Evangelical Seminary) is a professor of philosophy at Mitchell Community College and is currently working on his Ph.D. in the philosophy of religion. His interests have largely centered on the relation between Scholastic natural theology and early Reformed thought, particularly the works of John Calvin and Francis Turretin.

**Thomas Schultz** (PhD ABD, Saint Louis University) is the Assistant Professor of Theology and Student Ministries at St. Petersburg Theological Seminary and the founding director of FaithReasons Institute.

**Manfred Svensson** (PhD, University of Munich) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Los Andes, Santiago de Chile. His work is dedicated to the Augustinian tradition, to questions of continuity and discontinuity between medieval philosophy and the Protestant Reformation, and to contemporary authors like Kierkegaard, Bonhoeffer and C. S. Lewis. He has great interest in rival understandings of toleration. He has authored numerous books in Spanish including *Theorie und Praxis bei Augustin* (Freiburg, 2009) and *Reforma protestante y tradición intelectual cristiana* (Barcelona, 2016); and is the co-editor of the recently published *Aquinas Among the Protestants*.

# CONTENTS

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Preface   | viii |
| <i>Joseph Minich</i>  |      |
| 1 The Bible, Verification, and First Principles of Reason                                   | 1    |
| <i>M. Dan Kemp</i>  |      |
| 2 Faith and the Natural Light of Reason   | 32   |
| <i>Kurt Jaros</i>   |      |
| 3 The Place of Autonomous Human Reason and Logic in Theology                                | 52   |
| <i>John DePoe</i>   |      |
| 4 The Structure of Knowledge in Classical Reformed Theology:<br>Turretin and Hodge          | 64   |
| <i>Nathan Greeley</i>   |      |
| 5 Moderate Realism and the Presuppositionalist Confusion<br>of Metaphysics and Epistemology | 91   |
| <i>J. T. Bridges</i>  |      |
| 6 Presuppositions in Presuppositionalism and Classical Theism                               | 128  |
| <i>Winfried Corduan</i>   |      |
| 7 Presuppositionalism and Philosophy in the Academy   | 151  |
| <i>Thomas Schultz</i>   |      |
| 8 The Use of Aristotle in Early Protestant Theology   | 179  |
| <i>Manfred Svensson</i>   |      |
| 9 The Use of Aquinas in Early Protestant Theology   | 195  |
| <i>David Haines</i>   |      |
| 10 Classical Theism and Natural Theology in Early Reformed Doctrines<br>of God              | 231  |
| <i>J. Andrew Payne</i>  |      |
| 11 Van Til's Transcendental Argument and Its Antecedents                                    | 253  |
| <i>John R. Gilhooly</i>   |      |
| 12 A Tale of Two Theories: Natural Law in Classical Theism and<br>Presuppositionalism       | 274  |
| <i>Bernard James Mauser</i>   |      |



## **PREFACE**

**Joseph Minich**

THIS VOLUME is quite critical of the philosophy of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) and his followers. But many of this volume's authors offer such

criticism in the spirit of theological sons to a father, recognizing that Van Til's influence has also been for their good. These essays are, therefore, offered to the church in a spirit of gratitude for our fathers in the faith and for their virtues—even if we seek to make the case that the Van Tillian tradition has committed several errors that have had a significant impact on the life of the church. Balancing on these registers is difficult, and because there is to be no party spirit in the kingdom of God, it is fitting at the outset to name some of the ways in which the Van Tillian movement served the church during the complex twentieth century.

Of first importance, Van Til and his disciples were confident in the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. For all the ways we have perhaps disagreed about the usefulness and necessity of extra-scriptural revelation, in no way should we neglect the example of their unwavering confidence in Scripture (God's own speech to us). Indeed, for the Christian, the Bible is of the greatest importance, the very word of God. God's word is a source of truth and life, that which is worthy of our reliance and which both fittingly commands and has rightfully earned our trust. In this, we should not be one iota less confident than the followers of Van Til.

Second, Van Tillians were conscious of the spiritual and moral battle that often stands behind an intellectual battle. While they perhaps risked projection in certain cases, they were undoubtedly correct about the relationship between a misshapen will and the misshapen perception of reality.

Third, the Van Tillians insist that Christianity has something to say concerning all of life. While we might disagree about what this means precisely, it is nevertheless the case that the redemption of creation through the gospel has in its scope the whole of the world in all of its aspects. In this, they were faithful sons of their father, Abraham Kuyper.

Fourth, the Van Tillians cultivated theological creativity, fresh insight into Scripture, and the possibility of growth in knowledge.

Fifth, the Van Tillians were good at keeping the gospel at the fore. They have made bold evangelists. While we might not always agree with their particular arguments, we can only covet their heart.

Sixth, whether we agree with his philosophy or not, Van Til appreciated the importance of satisfying the Christian mind. Part of what has drawn so many people to Van Tillianism is its desire to give a satisfying account of reality relative to our distinctive Christian understanding. Many Christian

churches are alienating to thinking persons, and Van Til sought to address this both pastorally and professionally.

Seventh, a lot of modern work is lending credibility to the Van Tillian insistence that Scripture at least anticipates many philosophical insights.

Eighth, Van Til's movement has functioned (sometimes via later disciples) as a gateway drug to *some* useful philosophical insight, particularly on the nature of knowing.

Ninth, even if the Van Tillian movement tends towards biblicism, its expectation of finding relevant Scriptural insight into many fields has (in more competent hands, at least) yielded much insight and fruit. There are many questions that might not have been asked of Scripture apart from Van Til's influence.

Tenth, and crucially, Van Til cultivated an awesome view of God's grandeur, but also of God's availability to the creature and sinner. In a century when so much of Christianity has been reduced to fluff, and granting that not all who "talk big" about God are being truly pious, it is nevertheless a priceless *legacy* to have fathers who speak reverently of an awesome God, and who lead us to the One who gives Himself to us in His creation and covenant.

To the extent that we differ from our fathers and brothers, we differ as partners, therefore, in the project of God's kingdom. While we seek to go beyond and even depart from them in many respects, we go as building on a foundation and set of evangelical instincts which still inform our own concerns and priorities. It is our hope and prayer that these essays are received in the spirit they are intended—as a good-willed offering to fellow pilgrims on the journey to Christian maturity.



## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

MANY THANKS are due to Onsi Kamel, editor-in-chief of the Davenant Press, for his help throughout this project, and for everything he did to bring it to completion. This book would not be what it is without his input. I would also like to thank the contributors to this volume for their many efforts to bring it to fruition. This was, for everyone involved, a labor of love.



I:  
**THE BIBLE, VERIFICATION, AND  
FIRST PRINCIPLES OF REASON**

**M. Dan Kemp**

**INTRODUCTION**

CORNELIUS VAN TIL once claimed that “We cannot subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns of its proper function from Scripture.”<sup>1</sup> John Frame says of Van Til’s thought that “human beings are obligated to presuppose God in all of their thinking.”<sup>2</sup> Van Til and Frame claim that God is the ultimate basis of all knowledge. One famous reply to this view claims it is self-undermining insofar as the Bible does not consider itself to be the sole source of knowledge of God or many other things. The Bible, the reply goes, does not ask its immediate recipients to accept without verification the word of a purported prophet as a word from God. Frame replied that the verification promoted in Scripture is itself a word from God and must be accepted as such. Thus, they say, the Bible remains the sole basis for theology, and the integrity of *sola scriptura* is preserved.

In this chapter, I argue that, if the Christian Scriptures constitute or form the basis for all human knowledge, attempts to verify the Christian Scriptures are not epistemologically profitable. This result is particularly acute in readings of Scripture passages that seem to provide methods of verification for a word of God. I argue that the position put forward by Clark, Van Til, and Frame entails a reading of these passages that renders them useless as

---

<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 125.

<sup>2</sup> John M. Frame, “Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 282.

criteria of verification, even though, on the contrary, the passages present themselves as such. In short, the popular reply to critics of the Clark and Van Til school mentioned above does not succeed.

If Scripture forms the basis of all knowledge, then all arguments for the trustworthiness of Scripture are circular. Philosophical positions which view circular reasoning as licit have long been criticized. The absurdity of circular demonstration follows from the idea that premises should be better known than conclusions. If B is the premise for conclusion C, then B is better known than C. But if circular demonstration is possible, then C may be a premise for some conclusion A, which is a premise for the conclusion B, from which it follows that C is better known than B. It follows that B is better known than C and C is better known than B; or, in other words, that B is better known and not better known than C, which is absurd.<sup>3</sup> But why should we think that premises ought to be more plausible than their conclusions? In this section, I will show why it is important that premises be more certain than their conclusions. In other words, I will show why it is that premises of successful arguments make their conclusions more plausible than when conceived without them. If my argument succeeds, then the traditional argument against circular demonstration goes through.

I start with a preliminary description of the view that Scripture is the source of all reason, and I briefly discuss what motivates this view. Then I look at two biblical examples of divine revelation being tested by those who receive it: Moses' miracles in Exodus 4 and the standard for prophets in Deuteronomy 18. I then analyze the difference between fallacious and non-fallacious question-begging arguments. The difference will explain why the reply to the main argument is implausible. Briefly, non-fallacious question-begging arguments have no pretense about their circularity. They are not fallacious because they are not trying to convince the interlocutor of anything. On the other hand, fallacious question-begging arguments include multiple irrelevant premises since the conclusion has already been accepted. I then argue that the reply to the main argument makes the fallacious sort of question-begging argument, by including things in the argument that end up failing to

---

<sup>3</sup> The argument goes back at least as far as Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (72b33–73a5). See Christopher Shields' *Aristotle*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 133, for a presentation and discussion of Aristotle's argument against conceptions of demonstrative reasoning as circular.



contribute any credence at all to the conclusion. Finally, I consider and respond to possible objections.

I should address one potential concern before getting into the main of my argument. Readers might wonder why it is worth reading a philosopher about this question. Isn't it arrogant for a student of philosophy, who lacks training in the formal skills of exegesis and the relevant scholarly body of literature, to comment on this dispute? Shouldn't it be left to theologians and biblical scholars? Under some circumstances, this charge might land. I do not think it does for this debate, however, since no complicated exegesis is required for my argument. This chapter concerns the use of evidence, its relation to circular arguments, and these two things applied to particular passages in Scripture.

## **PRELIMINARY TERMINOLOGY AND MOTIVATION**

In this section, I will define and motivate the view that the Bible is the source and standard of all knowledge. To Cornelius Van Til, “The Reformed apologist assumes that nothing can be known by man about himself or the universe unless God exists and Christianity is true.”<sup>4</sup> Presumably, Van Til does not intend to assert merely that if God did not exist, there could be no knowledge because there would be nothing at all to know. This would not provide the Reformed apologist with an apologetic, since it would not explain, but only assert, that the universe depends on God. Just as the fact that humans could not know anything if neurons or atoms did not operate as they do does not imply that there was no knowledge until the 1890's, neither does the fact that our knowledge depends on God's existence imply that it depends on *knowledge of* God's existence. Rather, Van Til is directly asserting an epistemological dependence relation: that any knowledge at all depends on knowledge of God and Christianity. In other words, no knowledge can be had without first having knowledge of God, who can only be known by revelation. Thus, the revelation of God, the Christian Bible, is the first principle for “Christian”—that is, true and genuine—knowledge.

### **First Principles**

Advocates for this view motivate it by noting the need for a first principle of reason. A principle is an explanation of a thing. We can introduce this idea

---

<sup>4</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 317.

by identifying it as the answer sought for when we ask various “why” questions. Why does the earth revolve around the sun? Why is the plant in my window tilting toward the sunlight the way it is? and so on. Legitimate answers to these questions explain the phenomenon we are considering. But say you want to know the explanation of *that* explaining principle. You keep asking “why” until you reach the end of the explanatory line by reaching a principle that explains and neither has nor requires an explanation.

The explanations of our knowledge of these principles, however, are not identical to the explanations of the principles themselves. Humans are not privileged to have knowledge of the world, to paraphrase Aristotle’s famous quip, from the perspective of nature, absent great study or revelation. Hence, we also ask a different sort of “why” question. Why did the jury convict the criminal? “Because he was guilty” will not suffice as an answer. “Because the jury *found* him guilty,” is the right sort of answer, but one which requires further explanation. “Because the evidence was overwhelming.” “Because several reliable witnesses testified to seeing him commit the crime.” “Because we found a note written by the defendant saying he planned to commit the crime.” These answers follow what has sometimes been called an explanatory order of discovery, as opposed to the explanatory order of causes mentioned above. If you ask someone to explain how he knows that water turns to gas when heated to 212 degrees Fahrenheit, you do not expect him to start telling you about how at a certain match of temperature and atmospheric pressure, the vapor pressure of the water equals the pressure on the water by the atmosphere, and so on. In fact, this would not answer your question at all. In other words, you do not expect him to tell you *why* water turns to gas when sufficiently heated. One can know *that* water behaves this way without knowing why, from which it follows that the means by which one comes to know *that* is not solely the explanation *why it is that*.<sup>5</sup>

The answers we want to this latter sort of “why” question provide a basis for believing a proposition. The basis, moreover, is a normative principle governing our beliefs rather than, say, physical laws or biology. The latter are certainly requirements for human reason as we currently experience it without themselves being rational bases. For example, the soundwaves and neurons that allow me to understand what my teacher says are a cause of my knowledge. They are not, however, the normative feature we appeal to when

---

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, any further mention of “first principles” refers to first principles of discovery.

we think of knowledge having a ground or basis. Like principles of being or causes, principles of discovery eventually bottom out. When that happens, we have reached what we can call first principles of discovery. These principles are self-evident in that they possess everything they need to be known to a rational being. But self-evidence is not sufficient to make something a first principle, since it is possible for something to be demonstrable and self-evident. A first principle is a principle that cannot be explained by other principles. Thus, a first principle of discovery cannot be inferred by other principles. If it is to provide a basis for demonstrative knowledge, it must be indemonstrable and self-evident.<sup>6</sup>

A first principle of reason, then, must be an ultimate and normative basis of reason, as opposed to the metaphysical or material basis that might obtain. To give an example of how a series of “why” questions might terminate in a first principle of reason, imagine that you ask me why it is that I believe that I was born in Nuremburg. I reply that my parents told me I was. If you ask me why I believe my parents, I will tell you that they have been generally reliable in the past. Now here you can ask me at least two questions: (a) how I know that my parents have been reliable, and (b) why reliable witnesses ought to be believed. There appears to be no answer to (b), which asks for a reason to believe a self-evidently true proposition. Under normal conditions, and absent defeaters, reliable witnesses ought to be believed. My answer to (a) might be that my senses and memory tell me that many things my parents told me were in fact true. You might then ask me why I ought to trust my senses and why I ought to trust my memory. To that, again, I need not give an answer. I do not draw an inference from some more basic principle to my trust in my senses and memory. I just find myself doing so, and it seems right to do so.

It is conceivable that there could be more than one first principle of reason. The example above illustrates, for instance, how sensory experience and authority could be distinct epistemological bases. These various first

---

<sup>6</sup> These two features are necessary but not sufficient to make a proposition a first principle, according to Aquinas. The further feature required is motivated by the difficult problem of how we come to know first principles. See Scott MacDonald “Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press), 169–70. My thanks to David Haines for pointing this out. We need not discuss this problem here, however, since the description of first principles above is sufficient for my argument.

principles would each be “ultimate” in the sense that they cannot be reasonably questioned as reliable guides and they provide a basis for other non-basic beliefs.<sup>7</sup>

If there are multiple first principles, then “the ultimate standard” does not necessarily mean “the foundation or basis.” For instance, a principle can be ultimate in the sense of overriding other principles. Imagine someone who is hard of hearing. He can still get along fairly well in conversation because his hearing still gives him some knowledge. The fallibility of this knowledge is, however, increased due to the defects in his hearing. This greater fallibility often leads him to make mistakes that have to be corrected. One way to correct his mistakes would be to clarify a statement by writing it down. So, he thinks he heard someone say at a gathering that they are “getting an evening gown,” but his friend quickly writes a note to him that says he is “moving out of town.” Of course, he is able to read because his eyes are able to accurately perceive the letters on the page. Thus, the perception of his eyes overrides the perception of his ears, in this case. Notice, however, that this does not mean that his ability to hear is not its own distinct source of knowledge. He usually does hear things correctly and does not need correction.

Some say that the Word of God is “ultimate” in that it is overriding, like my sight in the example above. The Word of God, however, is *absolutely* overriding in that no other source of knowledge could defeat it. This view is compatible with recognizing multiple basic principles of knowledge, principles that cannot be challenged and immediately provide the subject with knowledge of some matter. For instance, one can know something by his senses, which have no further basis, and then later be told the same thing by someone he trusts. The same thing known is given by two distinct and independent principles of knowledge, sense experience and trustworthy authority. Neither is based on the other, and each is able to give knowledge of something without the other, like the way we might hear a dog barking and then see the dog that is barking. God provides us, on this view, with the ability to know various things and supplements or overrides those abilities with special revelation. So, if there is more than one first principle, then “ultimate” is not the same as “basis,” since a principle A can override a principle B under certain conditions without being the basis of beliefs that could only be known by principle B. For instance, my trust in testimony might under certain

---

<sup>7</sup> This does not imply that first principles are infallible. As the next few paragraphs will show, a source of knowledge can be without a foundation and fallible.

circumstances override my confidence in my vision without contravening the fact that I only know some things by seeing them.

If there is only one first principle of reason, then a principle being “ultimate” will mean that it provides the *basis* of all other knowledge. To use a metaphor, if a house gets some of its water from a city lake and some from a well, it has multiple water sources. If it only gets water from a well, however, all its water comes from a single source. Similarly, if knowledge has multiple sources, then knowledge might be obtained by one source (e.g. senses) without making use of another (e.g. testimony).

There are two queries: whether reason must have a single first principle of knowledge and whether God’s revelation is a source of knowledge. One view says yes to both. Non-Christians (and perhaps non-traditional Christians) may answer no to both or no to the second. Traditionally Reformed Christians may answer yes to the second, and no to the first. The debate among orthodox Christians, then, is between those who affirm and those who deny that there is a single principle of reason, since all orthodox Christians agree that the Scriptures are a source of knowledge.

### **Justification and Circularity**

How do we know if a purported first principle is correct? Consider again the exchange about my birth city. If the Christian Scriptures are the first principle of reason, then it will not do for me to end the conversation by asserting that reliable witnesses, sensory experience, and memory ought to be believed. Even these principles require rational justification. Gordon Clark says,

Every philosophy must have a first principle; a first principle laid down dogmatically...Since therefore every philosophy must have its first indemonstrable axiom, the secularist cannot deny the right of Christianity to choose its own axiom. Accordingly, let the Christian axiom be the truth of the Scriptures. This is the Reformation principle *sola scriptura*.<sup>8</sup>

According to this view, God’s revelation is the only ultimate principle. This claim has vexed many who hear it. If God’s revelation is the ultimate basis of all reason and knowledge, arguing with self-proclaimed non-believers becomes very complicated. On the one hand, the aim is to rationally motivate

---

<sup>8</sup> Gordon Clark, Trinity Lectures, “How Does Man Know God?”, 27:22.

belief in the truth of the Christian Scriptures. On the other hand, on this view, reason presupposes the truth of the Christian Scriptures.

According to many who have espoused this view, the necessity of always and everywhere presupposing a proposition does not preclude the possibility of providing evidence for that proposition.<sup>9</sup> Advocates of this view often emphatically tell us that evidence can be best, and indeed only, given for the existence of God when those evidences are put forth and interpreted according to “theistic standards,” which presuppose the existence of God. For instance, consider the cosmological argument for the existence of God. The position we are considering claims that this argument only works if we assume a theistic universe. Consider what John Frame has to say about this particular argument.

[T]he *kalam* cosmological argument is a good argument. But it is good only on the Christian presupposition that the world is a causal order and therefore a rational order. Deny God, and you deny the need for a rational structure or for a causal order reaching back to a first cause.<sup>10</sup>

Now, as Frame would have it, the cosmological argument for the existence of God obviously begs the question. The proposition “God exists” is present in the premises. This circularity is admitted and embraced by advocates of the view in question.<sup>11</sup> According to them, no other option is available to the faithful Christian. Frame writes,

---

<sup>9</sup> See Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) for a standard defense of this claim.

<sup>10</sup> Frame, “A Presuppositionalist’s Response,” 81.

<sup>11</sup> John Frame notes in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company), 130–31, that “Circularity in a system is properly justified *only* at one point: in an argument for the *ultimate* criterion of the system ... Allowing circularity at one point in a system, therefore, does not commit us to allowing circularity at all points.” This point is puzzling, however, since, as we will see, Frame develops the notion of a “broadly circular” argument that infers (e.g.) the existence of God from (e.g.) causation understood on a theistic basis. But then, if we can infer a view of causation from God’s existence, and God’s existence from our view of causation, circularity is not only a feature of “arguments for the *ultimate* criterion of the system.” So, it is not clear, however, how one can stop circularity from justifiably entering other “points” in a system once it has been let into the system at all. Further, the notion that circularity can provide rational justification is opposed to the idea of a foundation or “ultimate criterion,” which is motivated by the fact that circular demonstration is impossible.

Does this circularity entail the death of all reasoning...? No: (1) All reasoning, Christian, non-Christian, presuppositional, “classical,” is in this sense circular. There is no alternative. This is not a challenge to the validity of reason; it is simply the way in which reason works. (2) There are distinctions to be made between “narrow circles” (e.g., “The Bible is God’s word because it says it is God’s word.”) and “broad circles” (e.g., “Evidence interpreted according to the Christian criteria demonstrates the divine authority of Scripture. Here it is:...”). Not every circular argument is equally desirable. Some circular arguments, indeed, should rightly be dismissed as fallacious. (3) Reasoning on Christian criteria is persuasive because (a) it is God’s approved way to reason, (b) it leads to true conclusions, (c) and everyone, at some level, *already knows* that such reasoning leads to truth (Romans 1, again).<sup>12</sup>

If the Bible is the first principle of all knowledge, then no argument can be given for the Bible as revelation of God except arguments that have a proposition like “The Bible is the revelation of God” in their premises. Circularity is not a problem, it is argued, because no view in competition with Christianity is in a better position. As Greg Bahnsen puts it,

Christianity and its rival philosophies of life represent mutually exclusive principles of interpretation, criteria of truth, conceptions of objectivity, values and ideals, etc. Ultimately, then, the details of one’s theory of knowledge are “justified” in terms of their coherence within the distinctive and broad theory of which they are a part; they will be warranted in light of the fundamental metaphysical and ethical assumptions that are themselves warranted by those same epistemological assumptions. The arguments on both sides are “circular” in the sense that each worldview attempts to regiment its presuppositions as a consistent and coordinated perspective on experience.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, John Frame says,

[N]o system can avoid circularity, because all systems...are based on presuppositions that control their epistemologies, argumentation, and use of evidence. Thus a rationalist can prove

---

<sup>12</sup> Frame, “Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic,” 288.

<sup>13</sup> Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1998), 482–483.

the primacy of reason only by using a rational argument. An empiricist can prove the primacy of sense-experience only by some kind of appeal to sense-experience. A Muslim can prove the primacy of the Koran only by appealing to the Koran. But if all systems are circular in that way, then such circularity can hardly be urged against Christianity. The critic will inevitably be just as “guilty” of circularity as the Christian is.<sup>14</sup>

Recall the rather traditional picture of first principles I mentioned above. The thought pushed by Bahnsen and Frame in these passages departs with this school by insisting that first principles can be “proved” (i.e. demonstrated), albeit by circular means. On the classical picture, again, first principles cannot be demonstrated to be true in any sense.

It is not clear what must be assumed according to Van Til or Frame. The Triune God, the Christian Scriptures, or “Christianity” as a whole are each presented as the basis of reason. Of course, any one of these positions is going to argue that these principles are each mutually implicating. Yet I suspect that there is some disagreement among those who share the view that something distinctive of the Judeo-Christian outlook is the basis of all reason. Nevertheless, we can make progress in this debate without distinguishing between these positions. First, the position seems to be that God and the Bible are both somehow first principles of natural reason. In an earlier work on the topic, Van Til states,

It thus appears that we must take the Bible, its conception of sin, its conception of Christ, and its conception of God and all that is involved in these concepts together, or take none of them. So also it makes very little difference whether we begin with the notion of an absolute God or with the notion of an absolute Bible. The one is derived from the other. They are together involved in the Christian view of life. Hence we defend all or we defend none. Only one absolute is possible, and only one absolute can speak to us. Hence it must always be the same voice of the same absolute, even though he seems to speak to us at different places. The Bible must be true because it alone speaks of an absolute God. And equally true is it that we must believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130.

<sup>15</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Den Dulk Foundation, 1969), 12. Quoted in R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*:



Scott Oliphint says something similar about the relationship between the Bible and God himself in the presumption of reason.

[T]his is all just another way of saying that the only way in which we can know God—or anything else, initially—is if God graciously chooses to reveal himself to us. That revelation comes in and through creation (thus knowledge of creation presupposes knowledge of God), and through his spoken (written) Word. As creatures, therefore, there is an inextricable link—an inextricable *principial* link—between God and his revelation. From the perspective of the creature, we cannot have one without the other. And that is just to say that the *principia* [first principles] of theology entail each other. We know God properly by his revelation, and we know his revelation by knowing him properly.<sup>16</sup>

Van Til and Oliphint appear to say that God and his revelation are somehow both supposed to be the *single* basis of all knowledge.

My argument in this chapter applies to any of these positions. Even if it is thought that the Triune God and not the Christian Scriptures is the first principle of reason, the Christian Scriptures are presented as a more fundamental principle of knowledge than other epistemological standards such as natural reason, conscience, authority, and so on.

## **VERIFICATION OF REVELATION IN THE BIBLE**

Several biblical passages suggest that the Bible does not understand itself to be the only source of all knowledge or the basic principle of all reason. Although there are many relevant passages that involve verification of the word of God, we will only look at two in this section. First, we will look at Moses' authentication as a prophet from God to the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt. Then we will look at the prescriptions in Deuteronomy concerning authentication of claims to prophecy. In the next section, I will consider why some think that these passages provide evidence against the claim that the Bible is the basic principle of all reason.

---

*A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 321.

<sup>16</sup> K. Scott Oliphint, "Covenant Model," in *Four Views on Christianity and Philosophy*, ed. Paul M. Gould and Brian Davis (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 77.

### The Authentication of Moses in Exodus 4

In the early chapters of Exodus, God commands Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses is told by God to tell Pharaoh and Israel that he speaks for God. This is surely an incredible claim without a great deal of evidence. In order to follow Moses, the people would need some reason to think he is a proper authority, and Pharaoh would need good reason to think Moses speaks with an authority higher than himself. Anticipating this problem, Moses asks God how he can reasonably expect the people to believe him. The exchange is worth quoting in full.

Then Moses answered, “But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’”<sup>2</sup> The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” He said, “A staff.”<sup>3</sup> And he said, “Throw it on the ground.” So he threw it on the ground, and it became a serpent, and Moses ran from it.<sup>4</sup> But the Lord said to Moses, “Put out your hand and catch it by the tail”—so he put out his hand and caught it, and it became a staff in his hand—<sup>5</sup> “that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you.”<sup>6</sup> Again, the Lord said to him, “Put your hand inside your cloak.” And he put his hand inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous like snow.<sup>7</sup> Then God said, “Put your hand back inside your cloak.” So he put his hand back inside his cloak, and when he took it out, behold, it was restored like the rest of his flesh.<sup>8</sup> “If they will not believe you,” God said, “or listen to the first sign, they may believe the latter sign.<sup>9</sup> If they will not believe even these two signs or listen to your voice, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground.” (Ex. 4:1–9 ESV)

God tells Moses to perform various works, each more dramatic than the last, in order that the Israelites “may believe that the Lord...has appeared to [him].” He is later told to perform the miracles for Pharaoh, but also that Pharaoh’s heart will be hardened (Ex. 4:21). Pharaoh’s hard heart is both revealed by and the cause of his refusal to acknowledge Moses’ authority. This would not be intelligible unless it were assumed that a reasonable and non-obstinate witness to the miracles would confess belief after

beholding them. In other words, Moses' authority as a speaker of God's word is verified by miraculous events, and Pharaoh's hard heart is revealed by his obstinacy in light of beholding those events. Essentially, it will be reasonable to believe that Moses speaks for God because Moses will perform actions that only one with the power of God can do.

### **Claims to Prophecy in Deuteronomy 18**

Moses delivered the law to the people of Israel in the form of the book of Deuteronomy just prior to their entrance into the promised land. The law was given to the people at least in part because Moses was not to enter the land, and so they needed a codification of the law in order to remain faithful to God. Naturally, Deuteronomy anticipates that some would claim to receive a prophecy from God, and that such claims will need to be tested. Again, the text is worth quoting in full.

<sup>14</sup>“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—<sup>16</sup>just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’<sup>17</sup> And the Lord said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken.<sup>18</sup> I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.<sup>19</sup> And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.<sup>20</sup> But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’<sup>21</sup> And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has not spoken?’—<sup>22</sup>when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him. (Dt. 18:15–22 ESV)

God mentions that he intends to communicate with Israel through a prophet in the future. Also, however, there will be pretenders who claim to speak in the name of God. The stakes here are high. If God speaks to a prophet who is then ignored by the people, they will be held responsible (v. 19). Alternatively, listening to a false prophet is bound to lead the people

away from the will of God. Hearing a Word from God, but ignoring it, and hearing a word of man *as* a word from God are both dangerous. As the passage suggests, in this context, it would not always be clear which message comes from God and which does not. So God gives the people a test to sort out the genuine from the counterfeit prophets.

These passages illustrate the natural expectation that someone claiming to speak for God, and therefore a Word of God, requires a significant amount of evidence. God does not deliver the Word and then remain silent, expecting the recipients to take it in a sheer leap of blind faith. God gives them reason to believe that the Word is trustworthy. Moreover, the verifications displayed in these two passages are not rare instances in the Bible. The principle is found at various points in Scripture. The authentication of Jesus as the Messiah and of Paul as an apostle, for instance, reveal the same assumption. Scripture, it seems, can be authenticated. The question at hand is whether this authentication itself presumes what it concludes. In other words, the question at hand is whether the Bible presupposes a single basic principle of knowledge (i.e. God's special revelation) or many (e.g. the Bible and natural reason). It is to that question that I now turn.

## **INTERPRETING VERIFICATION OF REVELATION IN THE BIBLE**

In this section, I will briefly review the main arguments for and against the position that Scripture, *per* Exodus 4 and Deuteronomy 18, does not see itself as the sole basis of all knowledge.

### **The Argument**

Exodus 4 and Deuteronomy 18 are *prima facie* evidence against the claim that the Scripture is the sole basis of all knowledge. In response to John Frame's claim that the Bible must be presumed by all reason, Gary Habermas says,

Over and over again, with the help of several checks and balances, we are told to test God's revelation to us. To be reminded

of just a few of these, potential prophets are to be tested according to their own predictions (Deut. 18:21–22).<sup>17</sup>

Scripture is the inspired Word of God. And yet it tells us to test it. Moses' authority was tested by miracles before Pharaoh and the enslaved Israelites. The legitimacy of genuine prophecies after Moses were tested by whether the events prophesied came to pass. Neither test is constitutive of the Word or prophecies themselves. Moses' statement "Let my people go" is not the same as turning the Nile to blood; a genuine prophet's prophecy is not the same as its coming to pass. Thus, the prophetic claim of Moses and those of later genuine prophets are (1) inspired revelations from God and thus carry all the infallibility and authority therein and (2) appeal to something other than themselves (the warrant generated by miracles or predicted events coming to pass) in order to be known as Scripture. It follows, the argument concludes, that authoritative and infallible revelation from God is not just by itself the basis for all knowledge.

### **The Reply to the Argument**

Some have argued against the thought that verification of Scripture requires an authority external to Scripture. These objections converge on the point that allegedly external standards given by Scripture are in fact given by Scripture, leaving intact the claim that Scripture is not authenticated by any principle outside of itself. Frame captures this point in his reply to Habermas,

This procedure [of verifying alleged revelations from God, as is outlined in, e.g., Ex. 4 and Dt. 18] is what I would call a "broadly circular argument," an argument in which Scripture is verified by Scripture's own standards. How is it, then, that once we grant the legitimacy of such tests, "Frame's entire approach would have to be seriously amended" (p. 245)? I have never opposed the process of verifying Scripture by scriptural standards. Indeed, that is the heart and soul of my apologetic method.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Gary Habermas, "An Evidentialist's Response," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 245.

<sup>18</sup> John Frame, "A Presuppositional Apologist's Closing Remarks," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 357.

Frame employs the distinction between “narrow” and “broad” circular arguments to explain the arguments in passages like Ex. 4 and Dt. 18.<sup>19</sup> Narrow circularity argues thus: P, therefore P. Broad circularity argues something like thus: P, therefore Q, therefore R, therefore P. Broadly circular arguments for the existence of God employ evidences from archaeology and history, as well as commonsense, metaphysics, causation, consciousness, and morality. The rational inference from the occurrence of Moses’ miracles and a prophet’s prophecy coming to pass to the belief that they possessed a Word from God were broadly circular. Scripture is verified by a test prescribed by Scripture. As such, Frame’s response applies to the biblical passages an often-repeated principle held by advocates of the view in question: circularity is unavoidable in an argument for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity.

Recall that the initial argument against Frame’s view is that revelations were (1) fully authoritative and infallible revelations of God and (2) shown to be revelations by something other than themselves. Frame objects to the second premise. Of course, those passages appealed to “something else” in that they were not simply restated until accepted. That “something else” that they appealed to, however, was itself Scripture. So the Bible does not appeal to something other than itself in order to authenticate itself, and Ex. 4 and Dt. 18 have not been shown to suggest otherwise.

In summary, some argue that Scripture does not see itself as the sole source of knowledge since it assume that God’s word can be verified, as is displayed in Ex. 4 and Dt. 18. Others reply that this only shows that Scripture is verified by Scripture since these tests are themselves biblical standards. Indeed, this view must understand verification in these passages as “broadly circular” since it is clearly not narrowly circular. This reply does not succeed, however, since the account of biblical verification it implies is superfluous. Before I can show this, however, I need to make an extended point about circular or question-begging arguments.

## **QUESTION-BEGGING ARGUMENTS**

An argument begs the question when it assumes what it claims to prove. For instance, if I tell you that my friend is trustworthy because he tells me that he

---

<sup>19</sup> See also Frame’s, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130–133, for discussion of the distinction between broad and narrow circular arguments.

is, I have clearly made a mistake by begging the question. At the end of the day, I have argued that I should believe what my friend tells me because I should believe what my friend tells me. Some call this feature of the argument “circularity,” though I will use the terms interchangeably.

### **Valid Question-Begging Argument Type 1: Decomposition**

An argument is valid when the conclusion follows from the premises. To take a typical example: All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal. Clearly the conclusion follows from the premises such that the premises cannot be true and the conclusion false. An argument does not have to have true premises in order to be valid. Think of the following, obviously absurd, argument. If I am wearing a pink sweater vest, then I can jump over the tallest building on earth. I am wearing a pink sweater vest. Therefore, I can jump over the tallest building on earth. Every proposition in this argument is false, but the argument is valid. That is, the conclusion follows from the premises such that if the premises were true, the conclusion would be true also. When the conclusion follows from the premises, the argument is valid. When the argument is valid, and all its propositions are true, the argument is sound.

Here is another valid argument: “P. Therefore, P.” It in fact follows in all possible worlds that if P is true, then P is true. Or take the following argument:

- (1) P & Q.
- (2) Therefore P.

Each of these arguments assumes what it sets out to prove. Yet they are valid in that their conclusions follow from their premises. But these arguments clearly beg the question. Therefore, an argument’s being question-begging does not make it invalid.

It may come as a surprise to many that begging-the-question is a valid argument form. One need only crack open any elementary logic textbook to see “begging-the-question” categorized as an informal fallacy and thus fatal to an argument’s validity. However, there are reasons why an inference like this can be important and useful. Say that you are a logician or software developer and you need P *without* Q, but you only have “P & Q” for some reason. It is important that we should have rules allowing us to validly deduce

a conclusion from a premise that already contains that conclusion. If we were forbidden from arguing in this way according to the laws of informal logic, we would arbitrarily cut ourselves off from a perfectly fine inferential rule. It would be like trying to type without ever being allowed to use the “h” key. Of course, you may be able to get around the rule in most cases. (I just did two sentences ago.) But you might not, and in any case, why should you?

**Valid Question-Begging Argument Type 2: Independently Relevant Premises**

Imagine that you are planning to meet someone for lunch whom you have never met in person. You arrive at the agreed upon location at the agreed upon time but do not yet see your acquaintance. You then see someone who looks like the person you are supposed to meet walking toward you. You’re pretty sure, but you aren’t entirely sure. Then you notice that the person has a distinctly “academic” look, and you know the person you are meeting is a professor. The person is middle-aged, and you know that the person you are supposed to meet is middle-aged. In a split second, you formulate the thoughts in your mind. “That’s the person. It looks like the picture I saw. It matches the profile I know of this person. The person is also looking at me and walking toward me. Therefore, because of all these things, it is the person.” Now, in this case, you have made an argument that could be formalized in the following way.

- (1) P (“That is the person I am meeting.”)
- (2) Q (“That looks like the person I am meeting.”)
- (3) R (“That person is looking at me and walking toward me.”)
- (4) S (“That person is middle-aged.”)
- (5) Therefore, P. (“That is the person I am meeting.”)

Here, you have not inappropriately begged the question. Clearly the argument here is valid and sound. The reason is that the premises are *independently relevant* to the conclusion. In this case premise (1) really does add evidence for the conclusion as opposed to an argument that just contains (2)-(4), and (2)-(4) adds evidence for the conclusion more than just premise (1). In other words, this argument is not absurd because (1)-(4) pull real weight in establishing the truth of (5).



### Fallacious Question-Begging Arguments

It is perhaps misleading to say that begging-the-question is a valid form of argumentation. Yet as I have shown, it clearly follows, and not always trivially so, that if P is true then P is true. Hence, some instances of begging the question are perfectly fine arguments. On the other hand, some kinds of begging-the-question clearly make bad arguments. So when does this kind of argument become fallacious? We might learn from the following example.

- (6) P
- (7) If P, then Q.
- (8) If Q, then R.
- (9) If R, then P.
- (10) Therefore, P.

This argument is technically valid, since each conclusion follows from the premises. Moreover, let's say that all its premises are true. The argument is therefore sound. It is clearly a bad argument, however. Why? It is not because it begs the question any more or less than the valid arguments noted before. It seems, rather, that premises (7)-(9) perform no role in establishing (10). And if they perform no role in establishing (10), there is no point of their presence in the argument. If someone doesn't accept (10), then he doesn't accept (6), and the rest of the argument isn't going to help him accept the conclusion. Premises (7)-(9) become suspiciously disingenuous. They are a lot of work with no payoff, since they add no credibility to (10) that isn't already present in (6).

The first kind question-begging argument is useful for isolating a proposition from a conjunction of propositions. The second kind question-begging argument is useful for adding credibility to the conclusion because the other premises independently provide evidence for the conclusion. Question-begging arguments like (6)-(10) do not add credibility to their conclusions, nor do they perform the simple role such as conjunction decomposition. They are thus not useful for showing why the conclusion ought to be believed or how it can be known. Indeed, they couldn't be. In order for A to provide a reason to believe B, A must be better known than B. But if A is better

known than B, A and B cannot be the same proposition.<sup>20</sup> However, arguments like (6)-(10) are susceptible of appearing to have premises better known than their conclusions. Why think this? To see the point, imagine how bizarre it would be if someone were convinced by this,

P. (premise)

Therefore, P. (conclusion)

but not this,

P. (assertion)

This strikes us as bizarre because there is no rational difference between asserting “P” and deriving P from the truth of P. Thus, in the case that someone is convinced by a question-begging argument for P but not by the mere assertion of “P,” he or she has been persuaded by some *non-rational* aspect of the first argument’s presentation. The argument “P. Therefore, P.” doesn’t make P more reasonable. Similarly, the argument (6)-(10) above asks us to do the heavy lifting of considering (7)-(9) when (7)-(9) do not provide evidence for (10) without (6). Instead, the interlocutor is led to believe that (6)-(9) makes (10) more plausible in a way that is inaccessible from directly asserting (10) from (6) or “P” from “P.” It would be better to simply assert (6) or “P” and be done with it. If that doesn’t rationally persuade them, then inferring “P” from “P” can’t persuade them (barring insanity). And thus, any persuasion reached by adding steps is sheer deception. If asserting “P” does persuade them, then circular arguments cannot persuade them more. Circular arguments play no rational role to show that a conclusion is true unless, as I showed earlier, other premises *independently* provide evidence for the conclusion. Barring that condition, circularity is an exercise in superfluity.

Asserting “P” may be useful for one to know it, such as with the case of self-evident truths. It may be the sort of thing one believes merely upon understanding, such as the statement that “parts can never be greater than the whole” or that “those who expend great effort upon another are owed gratitude by the recipients of that beneficence.” But the *inference* from P to P, either immediately or with several steps in between, does not perform any role in showing that P is true. If it happens to be persuasive to someone, this

---

<sup>20</sup> Again, for discussion of this argument, see Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics*, II.19, and Aquinas’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s Posterior Analytics*, I.8.

can only be due to features of the argument that have nothing to do with why the conclusion follows from the premises. Thus, circular arguments, insofar as they are persuasive, are deceptive.

Again, question-begging arguments can be valid and sound, so it is not correct to say they are invalid according to the sense of validity most logic textbooks employ. They do not violate logical norms in that strict sense. And yet, most of the time, they are argumentative mistakes. There is a certain amount of deception involved in question-begging arguments that are psychologically persuasive, as we saw before with the person who was persuaded by “P. Therefore, P.” but not by “P.” Similarly, if someone is persuaded by “P; Q; R; S; therefore, P.” but not by simply “P,” then something has gone wrong. The error is not in strict validity, since P follows from P. The problem is that the dialectic between the person giving the argument for P and the person who does not accept P has been halted erstwhile the appearance of progress remains.

To summarize, bad question-begging arguments violate dialectical rational norms by giving the appearance of increasing the credibility of a proposition without actually doing so. So if an argument’s premises are dependently relevant to the conclusion, and the argument contains premises that do not work to prove that the conclusion is true, then the argument is to no gain. Broadly circular arguments violate dialectical norms of reason by asking the interlocutor to expend effort to no gain.

## **BIBLICAL VERIFICATION AND QUESTION-BEGGING ARGUMENTS: A REPLY TO FRAME**

Now that we understand what question-begging arguments are and when they make an argument bad, we can see why Frame’s objection against Habermas’s understanding of biblical verification fails. Frame’s reply to Habermas makes biblical verification superfluous such that it is unlikely to be a correct reading of passages like Ex. 4 and Dt. 18.

Even if Frame’s reply succeeded against Habermas’s appeal to Deuteronomy 18, it does not succeed in its current form against the appeal to Exodus 4. When Moses later performs the miracles (Ex. 7:10; 20) those who witness them do not have a scriptural standard by which to know that the test legitimately shows that Moses speaks for God. The Bible does not provide a “scriptural standard” for those whom the signs are meant to persuade because it does not address them at all. The Israelites are given only the Word

and the signs. They are not told, however, that the signs are a standard revealed by God.

This brings us to a fatal problem with Frame's reply to Habermas. According to that reply, those who hold that Scripture is the sole source of all knowledge must understand verification in passages like Ex. 4 and Dt. 18 as broadly circular arguments. In other words, the argument does not immediately infer "P" from "P" or "This word is a Word of God" from "This word is a Word of God." They involve a series of inferences between the conclusion and the identical proposition that shows up as a premise. But, as we saw, broadly circular arguments are worse than narrowly circular arguments in that they are more deceptive and fruitless in the way they violate dialectical norms of reason. If God's Word is the sole source of all knowledge, it is to no gain that it *provides* criteria by which God's Word can be known. That is because the inferential steps in between do no work to show that the conclusion is true apart from what the conclusion can do by itself. It is superfluous to give a test to verify an item of knowledge that itself constitutes the basis of all other knowledge. But giving a test or an argument provides the sense that there is a point to it, that some knowledge will be gained by following it.

It follows that Frame's view has the unwelcome consequence of making biblical verification pointless—a whole lot of work with no real payoff. Such verifications add no credibility to the conclusion that was not already present before. It would be pointless to do what Scripture tells us to do in these cases if belief in its truth could not be suspended. If the Word of God were the sole basis of reason, it would be manifestly absurd for it to provide a means by which to authenticate itself. It would be like a piece of writing telling you that it (that very piece of writing) is a piece of writing if it contains the letters "p" and "q." It is obvious that *it is already* a piece of writing and one could not recognize "p" or "q" unless one already *fully granted* the document in question to be a piece of writing.

Recall how I initially presented fallacious question-begging arguments. My presentation there corresponds to John Frame's distinction between "narrowly" and "broadly" circular arguments. Narrowly circular arguments can be valid, as I have shown. Broadly circular arguments are absurd, however, because they involve effort with no payoff. So rather than improving the situation by "broadening the circle," as it were, this makes the arguments worse. They are no less question-begging than narrow circular arguments, so any appearance they have of credibility is specious. They are, in short, worse

arguments because they violate rational norms by doing a better job than narrow circular arguments of *appearing* to establish a conclusion without doing so. It turns out, then, that it is a problem for Frame's understanding of verification in Ex. 4 and Dt. 18 that sees it as broadly circular.

## **RESPONDING TO OBJECTIONS**

### **No Religiously Neutral Arguments**

One objection to my thesis insists that no argument for the existence of God is possible unless it presumes the conclusion. It has been proved, the argument insists, that such "neutrality" is impossible and that every realm of knowledge makes clear and determinate presumptions about God. In other words, circularity is permissible because it is unavoidable. This argument will not do. First, even if it were true that all knowledge presumes religious knowledge, it wouldn't follow that *circular reasoning* is a licit way to argue. It would just show that all knowledge assumes God, which is compatible with the claim that religious knowledge is indemonstrable.

More importantly, this argument blatantly commits an is/ought fallacy. That is, it argues that because something is the case—indeed, couldn't be otherwise—it follows that it ought to be the case. But it clearly doesn't follow that just because all reasoning that humans actually do is circular, all human reasoning therefore ought to be. My argument has not been that there *are* successful arguments for the existence of God that do not presume the conclusion in the premises, although I think there are. My argument has been, rather, that there is no point in making an argument for the existence of God or the truth of Christianity that begs the question, because such an argument serves no rational purpose. If it were true that all human knowledge was circular, there could be no knowledge at all. But since we clearly do have some knowledge, and since circularity implies that there couldn't be knowledge, demonstrative knowledge isn't circular, and any theory that implies that it is circular is false.

### **Frame's Objections in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God***

John Frame anticipates in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* the objection that broad circularity does not have a proper use and therefore cannot be

rationally persuasive. He gives several reasons to think that broadly circular arguments have a rational role.<sup>21</sup> I will list and respond to them in order.

*“A circular argument displays more vividly the meaning of the conclusion.”*

This response does not save broadly circular arguments from argumentative impropriety. Even if the conclusion is self-evident, the inferential steps do not serve to make the conclusion better known than before. As I noted before, carefully attending to a self-evident proposition can bring one to know it over time. This may even occur in a broadly circular argument. Nevertheless, the inferential steps are accidental to the process of becoming aware of the proposition’s veracity. If the inferences were rationally essential to know the truth of the conclusion, then the proposition wouldn’t be self-evident. Thus, broadly circular arguments do not “display more vividly the meaning of the conclusion,” even if they are the occasion for vivid attention to the conclusion.

*“A circular argument sets forth the conclusion together with its true rationale.”*

The “true rationale” is “the reasons why it should be accepted.” For Frame, the true rationale for believing in God’s Word appeals to God’s Word. “That is all that an argument can do.” This is a simple misunderstanding of the notion of reasons. Reasons are the sorts of things we articulate in answer to “why” questions. They explain why it is that we ought to believe something. Such explanations can be acceptable only if they are better known than the propositions they demonstrate. My argument in this chapter has been that if Christianity or the Scriptures are the first principle of all reason, then *there is no rationale* for belief in them. *Perspicua vera non sunt probanda*. Evident truths are not to be proved.

*“Everyone already knows that Christianity is true.”*

Frame claims that the unbeliever already knows Christianity is true “at some level of his consciousness,” and will thus accept the conclusion of the circular argument. This is a red herring. It may be true that the unbeliever accepts the *conclusion*, but it does not follow that premises in circular arguments give the unbeliever (or anyone, for that matter) *reason* to accept the conclusion.

---

<sup>21</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 131–32.

Universal knowledge of God and his law does not show that circular arguments are proper forms of argumentation.

*“The circular argument presents a framework for the interpretation of Christianity.”*

Frame says, “[T]he circular argument presents a framework for the interpretation of Christianity—a presuppositional methodology, a conceptual scheme—and that is always an aid to understanding the cogency of a position.” If Christianity or the Scriptures are the first principle of reason, then the cogency of that first principle cannot be brought out any more than it already is except by attending to it directly. Again, as I’ve argued, broadly circular arguments do not make their conclusions more convincing.

### **Changing the View: Some Parts or No Parts of Scripture are Fundamental**

Someone might try to save the view in question by altering it slightly. One move would be to say that not all *parts* of Scripture are basic to all knowledge. This view has some plausibility, since it appears to be confirmed by a simple test. Consider the following passage:

Woe to her who is rebellious and defiled,  
the oppressing city!  
She listens to no voice;  
she accepts no correction.  
She does not trust in the Lord;  
she does not draw near to her God.  
She does not trust in the Lord;  
she does not draw near to her God.

Now consider this passage:

I have cut off nations;  
their battlements are in ruins;  
I have laid waste their streets  
so that no one walks in them;  
their cities have been made desolate,  
without a man, without an inhabitant.

Which passage is the inspired word of God and which is apocryphal? If this experiment was successful, readers suffered an inability to recognize God’s Word. Some may know the Bible and Apocrypha well enough to know

the answer to this question. But even for them, the experience of recognizing scriptural and non-scriptural passages should alert them to the fact that it is their memory, rather than the Bible as a principle basic to all knowledge, that tells them which passage is a part of the 66-book canon. An uncharitable objector might think that this refutes by counter-example the claim that Scripture is the sole basis of all knowledge.<sup>22</sup> And certainly, it does refute one version of that claim, which is that every *part* of Scripture is a manifest basis of knowledge, and thus it can be recognized as such. It would be unfair, however, to saddle advocates like Frame with this view.<sup>23</sup>

As I see it, there are two ways to preserve the claim that Scripture is the basis of all knowledge while avoiding the claim that *every part* of it is the basis of all knowledge. First, one may say that the whole of Scripture is such a basis, but not necessarily the parts. This seems wrong, however, since Scripture's whole is determined by a priority of the parts. In particular, some texts are accepted as God's Word on the basis of other texts. Take again the prescription concerning claims to prophecy in Deuteronomy 18. A genuine prophecy received by the people of God must be tested by this passage. This suggests that the prophecy was not known as a prophecy by its mere presentation. The passage that tests it, however, is Scripture of the basic sort. It is

---

<sup>22</sup> Michael Kruger says, "It is a caricature to argue that a self-attesting canon means that even the smallest portions of Scripture, down to even a single word, can be immediately identified by Christians as divine. Such a caricature is built on the presumption that the Spirit simply tells Christians which words are from God and which are not. But the Spirit, as noted above, does not deliver private revelations to Christians as they read a text (or do textual criticism), but simply allows them to see the divine qualities of Scripture that are already objectively there. Since such qualities are bound up with the broader meaning, teaching, and doctrine communicated by a book, they are not as applicable to individual textual variations (which, on the whole, tend to be quite small and change very little of the overall meaning). As a result, two different copies of the book of Galatians, though they would differ at minor points, would *both* still communicate divine qualities" *Canon Revisited: Establishing the Origins and Authority of the New Testament Books* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 101n37. Later he says, "[T]he biblical teaching that Christ's sheep hear his voice [i.e. that the biblical canon is self-authenticating] does not require perfect reception by the church with no periods of disagreement or confusion, but simply a church that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, will collectively and corporately respond (*Canon Revisited*, 107). Kruger here anticipates the objection against the self-attesting view of the canon on the basis of thought experiments like the one above.

<sup>23</sup> The answer to the question is that neither is apocryphal. They are both from the third chapter of Zephaniah (vv. 1, 2 and v. 6, respectively, ESV).



not authenticated by the passage authenticated by it. So Scriptural confirmation of Scripture does not work in any direction. In other words, Deuteronomy 18 is the foundation for knowledge that some prophecy is genuine, but not the other way around. This, of course, presumes knowledge that Deuteronomy 18 is Scripture. We have already seen, however, how the authority of Moses was authenticated to the people of Israel—not merely by the proclamation of the Word, but also by works that suggest that one who speaks does so with the authority of God. But where is the biblical norm? At the end of the day, particular texts—ones you can point to and read, identifying them as such—must be the basis for knowledge. Thus, if there is a biblical standard for verifying non-basic biblical texts, particular texts must be used to verify particular texts.

Second, one may suppose that some parts of Scripture are basic to knowledge but not others, and the basic ones supply the principles of verification for the non-basic ones. This option also fails, however. First, it is unlikely that some particular revelations would be the sole basis of knowledge just by being revelations while others are not. It is important to distinguish the claim under review from the claim that Scripture is self-authenticating. It is perfectly acceptable to think God might make certain revelations with manifest authority and others without it. Alternatively, if a revelation of God is the sole basis of all knowledge just in virtue of being a revelation of God, then it seems odd that other revelations are not basic since they share the same feature that makes revelations basic. Second, the basic texts related to verification will have an undesirable consequence for the same reason I have stated before. They involve pointless verifications. Presumably, the basic texts must at least be the ones that make no appeal, explicitly or tacitly to other texts, or that are confirmed by other texts. For instance, genuine prophecy was confirmed by Deuteronomy 18, and Deuteronomy 18 was confirmed by the authority of Moses. But the authority of Moses was confirmed by Exodus 4 and the ensuing narrative, which are the first suggestions that Moses speaks for God. Again, on this view, the Bible gives a “broadly circular” argument for itself and is thus absurd. It is more plausible to interpret the authentication Moses achieves, rather than presenting “biblical standards,” as appealing to standards which those who have not received revelation would be rationally capable of accepting.

If it could be shown that only non-basic passages are verified by Scripture, then this view could avoid the problem I am recognizing here. In that

case, verification would not be pointless since it would genuinely increase the credibility of a claim, that this or that text is the genuine Word of God. This view would still have to explain why some revelations are basic just in virtue of being revelations while others aren't. Nevertheless, these verifications would not be "broadly circular" either, which remains a problematic form of argument. This seems unlikely, however, not only because Exodus 4 involves verification of God's word and would clearly have to be a basic text. Also, as Habermas notes, the testing of Scripture seems to be a pattern that characterizes the whole.

### **The Reformed View of the Bible's Authority**

Some might be worried that my thesis constitutes an argument against the Reformed view of the Bible's authority. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* represents one standard Reformed view of the Bible's authority. I will repeat four often cited claims of the Confession here.

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

5. ... [O]ur full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof [of the Bible], is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.

9. The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

There is a lot of work to be done about the nature, clarity, and certainty of knowledge as it is understood in these four articles. I understand these

passages to entail, among other things, that Scripture is self-authenticating and that it is the sole infallible source of knowledge. It follows from neither of these propositions that Scripture is the sole source of *all* knowledge. My argument does not entail that the Bible is not self-authenticating, nor does it imply that the Bible requires external evidence in order to be known. On the contrary, these claims oppose the spirit of my thesis, which is that the arguments that Scripture affirms presume multiple sources of knowledge.

Take an example. Imagine that a man is standing trial for a crime he in fact committed and knows he committed. The criminal pleads not guilty and dishonestly denies having done the deed. Now, clearly, he knows what he is doing. He knows that he committed the crime and that he might get away with it by manipulating the presumption of innocence in our justice system. Now, further imagine that, for some reason, camera footage of the defendant committing the crime has been discovered and introduced into the court. The footage unambiguously shows him doing the thing he denies having done. The defendant (and, more importantly, the jury) has been given evidence for a bit of information that he already knew on the basis of his memory, but without depending in any way on his memory.

Similarly, the claim that good arguments for belief in God and the Christian Scriptures do not presume belief in God or the Bible is compatible with the claim that everyone has sufficient knowledge of God. In other words, belief in God and the Bible does need not be the basis of all knowledge to be universal. Knowledge of God and the Bible also need not be the basis of all knowledge in order to be absolutely overriding. It should be clear by now that my thesis does not compromise the doctrine of *sola scriptura*. Scripture being the sole infallible guide to faith and morals is compatible with the claim that there are other (fallible) sources of knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> John Calvin grants that non-circular arguments *can* be given for the reverence of the Scriptures (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.3). He suggests, however, that arguments are weak because, if we believe the Scriptures because of reason, then reason has authority *over* the Scriptures, and reason can later contradict or oppose the Scriptures. Many have said similarly. Cf. also Kruger in *Canon Revisited*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 80. But “the Bible is not the ultimate authority” does not follow from “the authority of the Bible can be demonstrated by reason” in any way that risks undermining Scriptural authority. The Scriptures cannot be known to be true unless the law of non-contradiction were epistemically prior to it, but it doesn’t follow that reason has authority over the Bible. If the best arguments tell us that Christianity is true and the Scriptures reliable, then a better argument cannot come along and show the opposite. Furthermore, reason does not “decide” the truth, but

## CONCLUSION

First principles are known indemonstrably. They are not known by inference from some other proposition. No argument can be given for first principles, but the Bible seems to assume that arguments for divine revelation can be given. Thus, Frame has not shown us why we should not read Scripture as *prima facie* evidence against the view that Scripture is the first principle of all knowledge. In fact, he makes matters worse by suggesting we “broaden the circle.” Increasing the distance between, say, “God exists” in the conclusion and “God exists” in the premises only gives the appearance of demonstrative knowledge. But in fact, insofar as such arguments are subjectively persuasive, they present a first principle as if it were something else. This is telling since it does not necessarily count against a belief to be put forward as self-justifying. But they should be asserted in their naked glory so that they can be known by themselves (*per se*) or their lack of self-evidence acknowledged. This constant inclination to regard Christianity as demonstrable may, I suggest, be the result of the operative but unacknowledged belief that it does not form the basic principle of all knowledge.

Scripture provides examples of God’s Word being tested. Further, these instances of verification are not plausibly explained as broadly circular arguments, that is, circular arguments that incorporate several premises. Broadly circular arguments include premises and sub-arguments that do not provide evidence for the conclusion. They do not make the conclusion more credible than otherwise. Thus, they are not useful as arguments. They are psychologically useful or persuasive, as my argument notes, but this is the very problematic thing about them. Their usefulness is not in any rational

---

discerns it, and therefore submits to it. This is often overlooked; some speak as if reason could “decide” Scripture isn’t authoritative if it could “decide” that it is. For example, if reason could establish Scriptural authority, it is thought, then reason’s testimony that miracles can’t happen could override the Bible’s witness to miracles. But if reason discerns the Scriptures are authoritative, then it can’t, properly speaking, “decide” miracles are impossible. Thus, it is possible that one can reasonably demonstrate that God’s word is the ultimate authority on which it speaks. Muller reminds us that God and the Scriptures are said to be first principles only loosely (“Principium Theologiae” in *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 288–89). Even though they are made self-evident by the Spirit, they can be demonstrated via reason. And what can be demonstrated through reason is not a first principle strictly speaking.

element in them, and thus they are deceptive as arguments. It is therefore not flattering to Scripture to understand it as putting forth broadly circular arguments when alternative interpretations are available.

This result prompts us to consider that there may be multiple first principles of knowledge rather than just one. Knowledge is not a system neatly worked out from a single indemonstrable axiom. Rather, there are many sources of knowledge—sensory experience, testimony, memory, conscience, and divine revelation—working together to inform our judgments.<sup>25</sup> I leave the task of working out these various faculties of knowledge for another day.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Although I cannot work out this suggestion, it should assuage those who insist the truth of Christianity or the Christian Scripture is the basis of all knowledge. Frame contends “allegiance to our Lord demands that we be loyal to Him, even when we are seeking to justify our assertions about him” (*The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130). Reasoning that does not presume Christianity, according to this worry, is “secular.” Thus, it fails satisfy the demand that everything, including reasoning, be done to the “glory of God” and therefore under Christ’s lordship (1 Corinthians 10:31). But if there are multiple principles of knowledge—however fallible—arguments for the truth of Christianity that do not presume the truth of Christianity (that is, the arguments do not contain the proposition “Christianity is true” in any premises even if the Christian interlocutor does not suspend belief in Christianity) do not thereby fail to be submitted to the lordship of Christ.

<sup>26</sup> My thanks to Harrison Lee and David Haines for comments on this paper, and to the attendees of the 2nd Annual Davenant Institute Regional Carolinas Convivium, who asked penetrating and insightful questions which forced me to sharpen and clarify this paper.









## MORE FROM DAVENANT PRESS

### RICHARD HOOKER MODERNIZATION PROJECT

*Radicalism: When Reform Becomes Revolution*

*Divine Law and Human Nature*

*The Word of God and the Words of Man*

*In Defense of Reformed Catholic Worship*

### INTRODUCTION TO PROTESTANT THEOLOGY

*Reformation Theology: A Reader of Primary Sources with Introductions*

*Grace Worth Fighting For: Recapturing the Vision of God's Grace in the Canons of Dordt*

### VERMIGLI'S COMMON PLACES

*On Original Sin (vol. 1)*

### LIBRARY OF EARLY ENGLISH PROTESTANTISM

*The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: In Modern English, vol. 1 (Preface-Book IV)*

*James Ussher and a Reformed Episcopal Church: Sermons and Treatises on Ecclesiology*

### DAVENANT GUIDES

*Jesus and Pacifism: An Exegetical and Historical Investigation*

*The Two Kingdoms: A Guide for the Perplexed*

*Natural Law: A Brief Introduction and Biblical Defense*

### DAVENANT RETRIEVALS

*People of the Promise: A Mere Protestant Ecclesiology*

*Philosophy and the Christian: The Quest for Wisdom in the Light of Christ*

*The Lord is One: Reclaiming Divine Simplicity*

### CONVIVIUM PROCEEDINGS

*For the Healing of the Nations: Essays on Creation, Redemption, and Neo-Calvinism*

*For Law and for Liberty: Essays on the Legacy of Protestant Political Thought*

*Beyond Calvin: Essays on the Diversity of the Reformed Tradition*

*God of Our Fathers: Classical Theism for the Contemporary Church*

*Reforming the Catholic Tradition: The Whole Word for the Whole Church*

### DAVENANT ENGAGEMENTS

*Enduring Divine Absence: The Challenge of Modern Atheism*

OTHER PUBLICATIONS

*Ad Fontes: A Journal of Protestant Resourcement*

*A Pilgrim Faith: Guiding Doubting Christians on a Journey of Faith (online-only)*

## ABOUT THE DAVENANT INSTITUTE

The Davenant Institute aims to retrieve the riches of classical Protestantism in order to renew and build up the contemporary church: building networks of friendship and collaboration among evangelical scholars committed to Protestant resourcement, publishing resources old and new, and offering training and discipleship for Christians thirsting after wisdom.

We are a nonprofit organization supported by your tax-deductible gifts.  
Learn more about us, and donate, at [www.davenantinstitute.org](http://www.davenantinstitute.org).