

PHILOSOPHY,
SCIENCE,

AND THE

*S*OVEREIGNTY
OF *G*OD



VERN S.
POYTHRESS

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VERN S. POYTHRESS

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All Bible quotations except those explicitly marked are from the Revised Standard Version.

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INTRODUCTION

Few evangelicals need to be convinced that it is important for Christians to say something coherent about modern science. A spate of evangelical books on the Bible and science testify to the continuing need. For one thing, the educated secularist regards the battle between the Bible and Darwinian evolution as over—and he thinks that evolution has won. So the evangelical press methodically turns out books about evolution, to undermine that easy assumption.

In the twentieth century, however, Darwinian evolution is no longer the unique focus of controversy. Far more powerful than evolution itself is an atmosphere, an atmosphere in which Rudolf Bultmann can make his famous statement that “it is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”¹ We live in an atmosphere in which the liberal Christian feels that intellectual integrity demands his giving up many elements in the biblical story. He may even feel religiously and emotionally attracted to miracles, but he “cannot” accept that they happened. He may feel that there is something unstable and subjective about modern destructive biblical criticism, but he is told that this criticism is the most advanced “scientific” tool that we have.

We breathe an atmosphere, in fact, in which not only evolution, but engineering, psychology, medicine, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, historiography, archaeology, art, music, and philosophy are all summoned to the task of undermining biblical teaching. And the “atmospheric” quality of their effects, more than any specific argument, makes their position all the more effective because all the more subtle and irresistible.

It is not my purpose to respond directly to all of this. Francis Schaeffer does it, evangelical answers to the liberals do it, apologists do it. In fact, part of the problem may be that too often evangelicals have been content *just* to respond. The problems are posed by the liberals, and evangelicals react with answers. The problems are posed by science, and evangelicals react with answers. No doubt this has value. We should praise God for the way that he has used it. But mere reaction has weaknesses. The problems come to evangelicals already in unbiblical terms, because the problems are posed by the *secular* culture. Too often the answers have been patchwork. Too often the answers have been still partly caught in a non-Christian problematic, and so have lacked conviction. (For example, the liberal dynamistic view of revelation has sometimes provoked a fundamentalist static view of revelation, with little appreciation for the development from Old Testament to New Testament. Liberal vaunting of science has produced fundamentalist rejection of science.)

Hence I wish to concentrate in this book on the positive task of uncovering some biblical foundations for science and the philosophy of science. Most of what I say is more an introduction to philosophy of science than a treatment of special problems in philosophy of science. The question of basic orientation is at stake.

There are problems in covering such a broad field. Constructing a framework for doing science involves, eventually, saying something about everything that there is. One must speak in generalities. But if one becomes too general, he becomes trite or obscure. If one becomes too specific, he is likely to lose sight of the forest for the trees. I have endeavored to compromise. To facilitate the compromise, two special devices have been introduced into the text: (1) a detailed numerical system of outlining, and (2) technical terminology. Neither of these devices is strictly necessary. But without them, this book would have grown to unmanageable length.

Numerical section numbers have been used to divide the text into successively smaller units. For example, chapter 2 on "ontology" is divided into subsections 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4. Section 2.4 on "Creation" is in turn subdivided into sections 2.41, 2.42, and 2.43. And so on. It is best, I think, for a reader to ignore this numbering at

first, until he has grasped some of the detail. At a later stage (particularly when section 3.35 is understood), the numbering will help to show how the topics are connected, and to show my justification for treating topics in the order and with the emphasis that I have used. At a later stage, in other words, the numbering system can help one to see the generalities in addition to detail.

The second device used is technical terminology. Technical terms are introduced one by one in the text, and are thereafter capitalized to distinguish them from the words of ordinary English. In addition, a glossary has been provided at the back of the book to summarize the meanings of the terms. However, the technical terms themselves have a good deal of vagueness and imprecision about them. You must not suppose that a technical term has a perfectly precise sense, exactly the same sense every time that it is used. The technical terms are essentially like new words in English vocabulary (indeed, some of them *are* newly coined). I use the word "description" rather than "definition" in introducing new terms, to remind readers that my "definitions" should be read sympathetically and not pressed for mathematical precision.

Once again, this device can be largely ignored at first; many of the technical terms have a meaning close enough to ordinary English to allow the reader reasonable progress even when he ignores distinctions. Moreover, a large number of terms are introduced simply to describe the study of various fields. For example, Theology Proper is the study of God, Aesthetics is the study of the Aesthetic Function, Ktismatology is the study of Creation, and so on. None of these special terms for "studies" need be mastered; the main point is that almost any item of interest can be made the subject-matter for human investigation. At a later stage, the reader will find the technical terms more important, because they serve as pegs or frameworks by which modern philosophy and science can be more easily compared to biblical teaching.

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," *Kerygma and Myth; a Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch (London: S.P.C.K., 1957), p. 5. Bultmann comments further, "The various impressions and

speculations which influence credulous people here and there are of little importance, nor does it matter to what extent cheap slogans have spread an atmosphere inimical to science. What matters is the world view which men imbibe from their environment, and it is science which determines that view of the world through the school, the press, the wireless, the cinema, and all the other fruits of technical progress" (*ibid.*, n. 1). Of course, Bultmann is concerned not so much with the question whether the secularist's "world view," is *true*, but with the question of how we *communicate* to secularists. Nevertheless, because he thinks that a direct challenge to this world view is wrong, he emasculates the gospel in trying to communicate it.

Chapter 1

ORIENTATION

The word 'science' occurs only twice in the King James Version, namely in Daniel 1:4 and I Timothy 6:20. Both times it means simply "knowledge," not "science" in our twentieth-century sense. Modern versions like the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, and the New American Standard Version therefore use 'knowledge' or the equivalent. Does this mean that the Bible says nothing relevant to modern science? Hardly. But it means that understanding the Bible's bearing on science is more difficult.

The task is difficult partly because it is hard to know what in the Bible to appeal to. Each person wants to find in the Bible what agrees with his own preconceptions, his own life-style, his own values. No one can come to the Bible with his mind a "blank slate." He at least has to know how to read, or how to understand the language in which someone else reads to him. Furthermore, everyone comes with a basic orientation either of trusting what the Bible says because it is God's word, or of distrusting it. Everyone has some vague idea of what he is likely to find there.

Is this bad? Simply to *have* preconceptions and life-style and values is not bad. Everything depends on what they are. So let me say what is *my* way of approaching the Bible and discussing the relation of the Bible and science. Others may not agree with me, but at least they will know how I am going to proceed. If they do not agree at the beginning, they may still come to agree later on. No one need be discouraged!

I will discuss (1.1) my presuppositions, (1.2) what tools and in-

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sights I bring to the Bible and to science, and (1.3) what is my purpose.

1.1 *Presuppositions*

By ‘presupposition’ I mean a belief or disposition to which one clings for life and death, and which one does not allow to be refuted by evidence. Let me illustrate with a hypothetical case. Suppose that Lydia is a believer in Christ. Lydia’s fundamentalist pastor stands up in the pulpit and announces that on the basis of the latest archaeological discovery in Palestine, it is no longer possible to believe that Christ rose from the dead. Her pastor then resigns his pastorate. What does Lydia do? She may want to find out more about this supposed “discovery.” But she continues to believe in Christ. She trusts in Christ more than in her pastor, more than in the judgments of archaeologists. She “presupposes” that Christ did rise.

Or suppose that Joan is an unbeliever. Lazarus returns from the dead, appears to Joan, and warns her that if she does not repent, she will go to hell. Even so, she continues in her unbelief, according to Luke 16:27-31—unless God is merciful to her and changes her heart (Ezek. 36:25-27). She “presupposes” that Christianity is not and cannot be true.

Now, my own presupposition is that Yahweh is who he is. It is unthinkable that Yahweh should be other than who he is. Hence it is proper that this should be a firm basis for everything that I do, including what I say in this book.

I must explain something of what I mean. In the first place, when I speak of Yahweh, I mean the God who has told us about himself in the Bible, which is his word. I am not talking about some vague, general “theism.” No doubt the word ‘God’ is often used by people in cases where they have no intention of identifying “God” with the God of the Bible. In using the word ‘God,’ they are not talking about Yahweh. Hence they are simply building in their minds a hypothetical god. We ought not to be fooled by the fact that they still use the word ‘God.’ For the sake of clarity, I will use ‘God’ when I am speaking of Yahweh and ‘god’ or ‘idol’ when I am

speaking of any "God" who is not like Yahweh and does not do what Yahweh is recorded as doing in the Bible.

In saying this, I simply want to make the point that Cornelius Van Til has made already: the only theism worthy of the name is Christian theism, biblical theism, Trinitarian theism.¹ Jesus says, "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Hence no one knows God aright unless he knows God through Jesus Christ who has come in the flesh. "Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God" (II John 9).

In the second place, when I say that "Yahweh is who he is," I mean to summarize what the Bible says, not to go off on a speculative tack. I think first of all of the fact that Jesus Christ is Yahweh (I Cor. 12:3; Acts 10:36; Heb. 1:10-12). He is my Lord, to whom I owe unconditional allegiance, and to whom I am to entrust my life and my salvation. Thus, instead of saying that I presuppose that Yahweh is who he is, I could equally well have explained my presuppositions in the words of Van Til:

As Christians we are not, of ourselves, better or wiser than were the Pharisees. Christ has, by his word and by his Spirit, identified himself with us and thereby, at the same time, told us who and what we are. As a Christian I believe first of all in the testimony that Jesus gives of himself and his work. He says he was sent into the world to save his people from their sins. Jesus asks me to do what he asked the Pharisees to do, namely, read the Scriptures in light of this testimony about himself. He has sent his Spirit to dwell in my heart so that I might believe and therefore understand all things to be what he says they are. I have by his Spirit learned to understand something of what Jesus meant when he said: *I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. I have learned something of what it means to make every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, being converted anew every day to the realization that I understand no fact aright unless I see it in its proper relation to Christ as Creator-Redeemer of me and my world. I seek his kingdom and its righteousness above all things else.²

In the third place, the fact that Jesus Christ is *Lord* implies that

I ought to heed and to take to heart everything that he says. And, as Van Til says, "He has written me a letter."³ Because the Bible is the word of my *Lord*, I try to give heed to everything that it says with the kind of obedience that my Lord deserves.

I could wish that this were all that I needed to say about the status of the Bible. But, unfortunately, Bible-believing Christians *do* disagree among themselves to some extent about what the Bible teaches. Some of these differences have a great influence on the development of Christian philosophy. So I will specify more exactly: my own interpretation of the Bible is like that of the Reformation. More specifically still, it is like that of the Westminster Confession of Faith.⁴ I cannot take space here to argue about it. I am aiming at Reformed philosophy. This does not necessarily mean that, if others do not like the Reformation, they will not follow me. I simply want to be frank about my own biases.

Though these are my presuppositions, I am not saying that I decided on these presuppositions by an arbitrary, sudden "leap of faith." Actually, I cannot trace exactly how I came to where I am. All I am saying is that these are in fact my sure basis for doing philosophy, and that they *ought* to be other people's basis.

Isn't there a problem in the fact that I have a bias? I think not. Positively, the Bible indicates that people ought to approach God's world with this kind of bias. Negatively, the Bible indicates that an unbeliever also has a bias, and a bad bias at that. He is a covenant-breaker, a rebel against God.

Cornelius Van Til has already said much about this, so I will not dwell on it. I should only like to make one point. Perhaps the easiest way for a believer to illustrate that the unbeliever has a bias is to confront him with the believing attitude that I have sketched out above. Then the believer says to the unbeliever, "You too ought to look at the world in a Christian way." To this the unbeliever could respond in three basic ways. (1) He could become a Christian, in which case he would begin to have (though imperfectly) a Christian bias. (2) He could say, "I have a religious bias too. I'm against Christianity as you describe it and for Buddhism (or atheism, materialism, etc.)." (3) He could say, "It's bad for you to start with any bias. You must

clear away the 'slate' and try to approach the world fresh, with no biases at all. That is what I try to do."

Now consider the dialog that might follow.

Christian: "I see that you think that it is all right to do your thinking without Christian biases. Now I would be the first to affirm that extraordinary feats of thinking and remarkable insights have been achieved by people who are not Christians. That's not the question. The Christian faith says that people *ought* to approach the world with Christian bias. Notice the ethical force there. You evidently disagree with that 'ought.' Hence you have already rejected the Christian faith (not that you will necessarily reject it forever, but you are rejecting it right now). You have a religious bias."

The unbeliever: "I haven't made a religious commitment at all; I've simply kept myself open for various possibilities."

Chr.: "You *are* denying, by action if not word, that you have the clear *obligation* to think with Christian bias."

Unbel.: "No, I'm keeping myself open."

Chr.: "Is that 'openness' better than Christian bias?"

Unbel.: "I don't know." (If he said yes, he would clearly be guilty of anti-Christian bias.)

Chr.: "Ought you to be open?"

Unbel.: "I don't know."

Chr.: "You're rebelling against God insofar as you don't listen to him."

Unbel.: "O.K., I *do* think that I ought to be open until I can really get convinced that Christianity is true."

Chr.: "Your bias is in that 'ought' and in the fact that you won't come to Christ now."

Unbel.: "We're quibbling over a term. You are in effect rejecting the Christian faith, and that will color your thinking inasmuch as you won't use the Bible as an unimpeachable authority. This is a religious bias against Christianity."

So perishes the myth of the autonomy or neutrality of thought. Thinking and discussion is not done in a "vacuum," but by people who have certain attitudes toward God's claims in the Bible.

1.2 *In medias res*

So far I have talked about my presuppositions, about what is “nonnegotiable” for me. But presuppositions are not the only thing that we bring to the task of doing Christian philosophy of science. Everyone has the background of his personal history, his knowledge of people, linguistic tools and historical tools for understanding the Bible better, and so forth. I do not intend to shove these things aside either, as if I could start fresh like Descartes. My personal baggage is one of God’s gifts to me. But I must be careful. “Personal baggage,” unlike the Bible, is fallible.

I do not intend to make a *sharp* distinction between what is nonnegotiable (presuppositions) and what is negotiable. About certain of the Bible’s teachings I am only relatively sure, so these are only relatively nonnegotiable. This is another way of saying that Christian growth is a process, including growth in what we know as well as in what we do.

Moreover, I hope that I am making demands on others similar to what I am making on myself. I do not expect readers to forget their present “knowledge,” but to shake it up in the light of Scripture, to rearrange their world view, to repudiate what they see is un-scriptural.

What I am saying about my “personal baggage” may seem trivial, but I think that it is worth saying. Certain writings by Christians in our day have made it a point to strip themselves down to some few basic truths before proceeding to build a larger system.⁵ Gordon H. Clark appeals to the law of contradiction to decide among religious world views.⁶ John W. Montgomery appeals to historical evidence for the resurrection.⁷ I will not dispute that there is methodological value in seeing what conclusions follow from limited assumptions; and various sets of starting assumptions are interesting. However, the judgments about what does and does not follow from the assumptions in question are themselves influenced by the judge’s “personal baggage” (see Appendix 4). There is nothing embarrassing about that. It is part of being man, the creature of God, depending on God for knowledge of the truth.

1.3 *Problems of philosophy of science*

Just what kind of questions does philosophy of science deal with? Well, there are many such questions, but I propose to focus on three. Scientific activity generally presupposes, within a scientific community, some kind of answers, vague or specific, to three interconnected basic problems: (a) what are we studying; (b) how do we come to know what we know about it (scientific method); and (c) what is the value of this study. In a word, a science relies on (a) ontology, (b) an epistemology or, more generally, a methodology, and (c) an axiology or system of values. Part (c) includes both justification for choosing one special problem over another, and means of evaluating the quality and validity of scientific achievements. These three areas will be the subjects for discussion in the next three chapters.

But there is a danger here. The danger is that we will define science and formulate expectations about science too much in terms of the science that we see in the twentieth century. The particular form that sciences have taken in our time is greatly influenced by a historical development that has contained both good and bad influences. The existing form of sciences therefore cannot serve as a norm for us.

Hence I propose, before "homing in" on twentieth-century science, to consider the three basic problems in a much more general setting. How do we answer, from a Christian point of view, the following questions: (a) what is there? (ontology); (b) how does everything function? (methodology); and (c) why is it there? (axiology). All three of these questions are patently metaphysical questions. That does not mean that we are obliged to give "metaphysical" answers in the traditional sense. *Some* kind of answer is nevertheless needed for the philosophy of science.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), pp. 9-13, 114f.; *idem*, *Apologetics* (unpublished syllabus; Chestnut Hill, Pa.: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1959), p. 66; and many places elsewhere.

2. Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), pp. 4-5.

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

4. Of course—need I say this?—I do not mean to sanction every turn of phrase in the Westminster Confession. Some phrases in it, like “light of nature” and “covenant of works,” are wide open to misunderstanding.

5. Herman Dooyeweerd appears to speak of such a “stripping down” in *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), II, 73-74. In his case, however, he would not describe what remains as “basic truths,” but rather as a religious direction.

6. Gordon H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 30ff.

7. John W. Montgomery, *Where Is History Going? Essays in Support of the Historical Truth of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969); *idem*, *The Shape of the Past: An Introduction to Philosophical Historiography* (Ann Arbor: Edwards Brothers, 1962).