

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

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Theological
Seminary of
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season,
out of season;
reprove, rebuke, exhort
with all longsuffering
and doctrine.”

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Shall We Reason Together? Part Six: Reason and “Reason”

Kevin T. Bauder

Whatever Scripture affirms is absolutely authoritative. Many of the biblical affirmations imply other affirmations. The question is, how authoritative are the affirmations that Scripture implies?

Some people suggest that only the bald statements of Scripture exert truly divine authority, and that all inferences drawn from Scripture, however necessary they may be, come with a lower level of authority or with no authority at all. These people would argue that we must not insist upon such inferences as matters of belief and practice.

I have been arguing to the contrary. I believe that it is wrong to limit the authority of any necessary implication of Scripture. Rather, the necessary inferences that we draw from the Bible should be accepted with all the authority of the Bible itself. They are part of what God has revealed in His Word.

In reading the Bible, however, we find that the writers of Scripture are sometimes highly critical of human reasoning. This creates a problem for someone who holds my view: how can reasoned conclusions be as authoritative as Scripture itself when Scripture sometimes seems to take a dark view of reason?

The problem is not simply mine. It is one that is present within the pages of Scripture itself. As we have seen, the writer to the Hebrews thought that his readers should have reasoned to

certain conclusions from brief statements in the Old Testament. Those conclusions should have been absolutely authoritative for them. Their failure to reach those conclusions was a token, not merely of intellectual limitation, but of spiritual immaturity. Likewise, Jesus thought that the Sadducees should have recognized certain implications about the resurrection from a verse in the Old Testament. Jesus did not treat these conclusions as a separate thing from knowing Scripture. Instead, He accused the Sadducees of *not knowing* Scripture, and the accusation was grounded in their failure to draw the necessary inferences from the text.

Both Jesus and the writer to the Hebrews thought that people should recognize the authority of inferences drawn from the text of Scripture. For Jesus, drawing a correct inference is tantamount to knowing Scripture itself. In Hebrews 5, drawing sound inferences is an indispensable aspect of spiritual maturity. Given this high view of necessary inferences, how could Scripture elsewhere speak so disparagingly of Reason?

The answer is that “Reason” (in quotation marks, with a capital “r”) is not the same thing as reason. In the latter instance, *reason* is a synonym for logic, whether deductive or inductive. In the first, “Reason” denotes something like *plausibility*. In this sense, when people say that an idea is reasonable, they mean that it seems credible or likely to them. I suggest that what the Scriptures disparage is not reason (the drawing of sound inferences from the text,) but rather the wrong use of “Reason.”

In a statement that allows no exceptions, Paul writes that humans, having rejected God, became empty in their reasonings and stupid (literally “ununderstanding”) in their hearts (Rom. 1:20-21). He grounds this observation in the fact that all creation points to the True and Living God. When people reject God, they must still explain what they see in creation. All their attempts, however, are skewed. Due to their prior moral commitments, natural humans invariably draw the wrong conclusions concerning the Creator.

Such people cannot reason correctly. Sound reason requires us to reason in valid syllogisms from true premises. Depraved humans, however, always begin with untrue premises. Only meaningless conclusions can be drawn from false assumptions. By definition, natural human reasoning about God is unsound—even when the arguments are formally valid.

That is precisely why natural humans *cannot* know the things of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:14). They rely upon false assumptions, and therefore they do not welcome divine truth. Given their pre-commitments, God’s revelation seems absolutely ludicrous to them. They invent alternative explanations that fit their own perceptions of what is plausible.

In fact, they construct elaborate intellectual systems in order to explain away the God of the Bible. These systems are the “strongholds” that Paul condemns in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6. Paul made it his business to dismantle such strongholds by casting down the false reasoning (reasoning based upon false assumptions) and bringing every thought-system into captivity to the obedience of Christ. He did this, not by using carnal weapons such as coercion, but by using spiritual weapons, namely, by challenging the false assumptions and invalid arguments upon which the unsound reasoning was based. Actually, 2 Corinthians is filled with examples of that activity.

Invalid arguments are like bad plumbing. Even if they are connected to true premises, the water never gets to the tap. Valid arguments that rely upon false premises are like good plumbing that has been hooked up to foul water. However functional the plumbing itself may be, nothing drinkable will come out of the tap.

Natural humans invariably reason from first premises that are false. Sometimes they also reason in ways that are not valid. They do both of these things in order to protect themselves from the full knowledge of God that is breaking in all around them. They use “Reason” —*bad* “Reason” — as an engine against the Almighty. This is the depraved “Reason” that Scripture condemns.

Not once does the Bible ever rebuke the drawing of valid inferences from true premises. In fact, the Bible overtly *requires* God’s people to draw valid inferences from its own statements. Clearly, this is not the “Reason” that God condemns. It is a part of spiritual maturity, and, indeed, an aspect of knowing Scripture itself. As Jesus intimates, we do not know the Scriptures unless we know what the Scriptures imply.

There is such a thing as bad reason. The solution for bad reason, however, is never simply to abandon rationality. The solution for bad reason is always good reason. We must replace bad arguments with better arguments.

More than that, we must be humble enough to acknowledge that some truths could never be discovered by any amount of argument. Without revelation, reason is always inadequate. One aspect of reasoning well is to know the limitations of reason itself. Perhaps we had better turn our attention to some of those limitations. ✕

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

Conscience.

George Herbert (1633)

Peace, prattler, do not lour:
Not a fair look but thou dost call it foul;
Not a sweet dish but thou dost call it sour;
Music to thee doth howl.
By list'ning to thy chatting fears,
I have both lost mine eyes and ears.

Prattler, no more, I say:
My thoughts must work, but like a noiseless sphere.
Harmonious peace must rock them all the day:
No room for prattlers there.
If thou persistest, I will tell thee
That I have physic to expel thee.

And the receipt shall be
My Saviour's blood: whenever at His board
I do but taste it, straight it cleanseth me,
and leaves thee not a word;
No, not a tooth or nail to scratch,
and at my actions carp, or catch.

Yet if thou talkest still,
Besides my physic, know there's some for thee:
Some wood and nails to make a staff or bill
For those who trouble me:
The bloody cross of my dear Lord
Is both my physic and my sword. ✠

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