Introduction

‘Why do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God? How can you persuade me that it’s true?’

It had been a difficult first term at university for Jo. A committed Christian, she was facing a real challenge with her theology and religious studies degree. Her A level in RS had been taught by a Christian teacher who was able to explain things sympathetically and give guidance from a biblical point of view. But at university it was different. Few, if any, of the lecturers seemed to share her Christian faith and some were openly quite hostile to any form of conservative belief about the Bible. Jo was faced with a constant barrage of critical theories about the biblical texts and intimidating bibliographies of titles written by eminent professors, none of whom seemed to believe what she believed. Towards the end of the term she tried to explain her evangelical convictions to Alex, another first-year student on her course, who seemed happy to accept everything they were being taught. But Alex’s questions at the end of their discussion left her struggling: ‘Why do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God? How can you persuade me that it’s true?’

How should Jo respond to these questions?

This chapter attempts to outline some of the issues that need to be addressed in constructing a theology of belief in the Bible. What is it that convinces us that the Bible is God’s Word - is it faith, or evidence about the Bible’s reliability and truthfulness, or some combination of the two? Also, on what basis and using which method can we seek to persuade others of the divine origin of the Bible - by presenting evidence for the Bible’s reliability, or pointing them to Christ, or some combination of the two?
Here I will be arguing for a form of presuppositionalism over against a more evidentialist approach, but this will be unpacked in terms that are more theological than philosophical. This is not to deny the value of these terms, as in most Christian thought they rest on clear theological understandings about what they mean and where their value comes from. However, I wish to outline an approach to the truth of the Bible that does not start with the merit or demerits of certain terms used in apologetics but that starts by working outwards from the biblical data. The chapter aims to develop an explicitly theological approach to the Bible - by this I mean that the Bible itself tells us why it is we believe the Bible to be God’s Word and this fact has to be embedded in all our thinking about the complex relationship between faith and evidence. The progression of argument will inevitably lead us to consider what is involved in both presuppositionalism and evidentialism, and to consider briefly how the argument bears on what has become known as ‘Reformed epistemology’. We will also reflect briefly on the suggestion that Jo should not even try to provide an answer to Alex’s questions, as the questions themselves are misguided - it is belief in Christ, not the Bible, that is the really important matter.

The priority of the gospel and the testimony of the Spirit

We can get straight to the heart of the issue by considering a number of biblical texts that point us towards a theological approach to the Bible:

*At that time Jesus said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, and revealed them to little children.' (Matthew 11:25)*

*Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.' (Matthew 16:16-17)*

*In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' (John 3:3)*

*We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:12-14)*
The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:4-6)

But when God, who set me apart from birth and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not consult any man ...(Galatians 1:15-16)

So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. (Ephesians 4:17-18)

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. (1 Thessalonians 1:4-5)

But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth ...As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit - just as it has taught you, remain in him. (1 John 2:20,27)

This is the one who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. For there are three that testify: the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. (1 John 5:6-10)

It could be argued that none of these texts relates directly to the issue of how we come to believe the Bible, but they do impinge directly on two theological issues: first, how we come to perceive spiritual truth; and, further, how we come to embrace it for what it truly is - the testimony about Christ and his gospel. These texts make it clear that the human mind is
incapable of seeing and embracing spiritual truth without the working of the Holy Spirit; he removes innate blindness and illuminates the mind to grasp the truth of the gospel. It is the Holy Spirit who gives birth to faith and it is then faith that grasps hold of the spiritual truths held out in the gospel. Faith recognizes Christ for who he claims to be, grasps the meaning of the cross, sees the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ and therefore believes the words that communicate these truths to be true words.

My thesis here can be simply stated: through the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating the mind to the truths of the gospel, the Bible is accepted as true through faith. We come to accept the truthfulness of the Bible because we have first had our minds enlightened to see the truth of the Gospel, which we embrace by faith. This faith enables us to see that the words of the Bible purport to be God’s words and to grasp that God’s words are true words. J. I. Packer explains this further:

*Having disclosed himself objectively in history, in His incarnate Son, and in His written scriptural Word, God now enlightens men subjectively in experience, so that they apprehend His self-disclosure for what it is. Thus he causes them to know Him and his end in revelation is achieved ...Historic Protestantism has regularly described this part of the Spirit's ministry as His witness to divine truth. It is a healing of spiritual faculties, a restoring to man of a permanent receptiveness towards divine things, a giving and sustaining of power to recognize and receive divine utterances for what they are. It is given in conjunction with the hearing or reading of such utterances, and the immediate fruit of it is an inescapable awareness of their divine origin and authority.*

This position is known historically as the 'internal testimony of the Spirit' and is found classically in John Calvin. In context, Calvin was rejecting the idea that faith in the truth of Scripture rested on the authority of the church, yet his central argument is relevant to our discussion here. His words are worth quoting substantially:

*They who strive to build upon firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards ...even if anyone clears God's Sacred Word from man's evil speaking, he will not at once imprint upon their hearts that certainty that piety requires. Since for unbelieving men religion seems to stand by opinion alone, they, in order not to believe anything foolishly or lightly, both wish, and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke divinely. But I reply: the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded*
...Some good folk are annoyed that a clear proof is not ready at hand when the impious, unpunished, murmur against God’s Word. As if the Spirit were not called both ‘seal’ and ‘guarantee’ (2Cor.1:22) for confirming the faith of the godly; because until he illumines their minds, they ever waver among many doubts! Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and that the Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning ... Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else’s judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we arm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has owed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as a thing far beyond any guesswork.

Two points follow from this. First, it is clear that Calvin establishes a distinct difference between ‘inspiration’ and ‘internal testimony’. Inspiration is bound up with the very nature of Scripture and is what guarantees the conclusion that ‘the prophets spoke divinely’; it therefore also guarantees that the Scriptures are by definition authoritative. The internal testimony work of the Spirit is what enables us to perceive that Scripture is authoritative. This distinction is very important to bear in mind given that in much modern theology, particularly in the Barthian tradition, the internal testimony of the Spirit replaces the traditional concept of inspiration and is regarded as the decisive factor in making Scripture authoritative.

Second, an argument for the truth of the Bible following this position holds that the truthfulness of the Bible is an article of faith - it is not something we come to by empirical discovery. In much the same way as one cannot prove the existence of God, given that it is a belief one holds through faith, so likewise one cannot conclusively prove the full truthfulness and divine origin of the Bible. On what ground should articles of faith be believed? Packer states that Scripture answers this question by resolving the ground of faith, formally, into the veracity of God and, materially, into the divine origin of the propositions put forward for belief. The proper basis for believing is, on the one hand, the acknowledgment that God speaks only truth and, on the other, the recognition of what is proposed as something which He Himself has said. Articles of faith are just truths for which God is perceived to have vouched.

In other words, if Scripture declares that God is a God of truth who speaks only truth, and if Scripture claims that it is the actual words of that God, then that is the ground of our believing the Bible to be true. This is a belief we come to by faith because our belief in the God who spoke the Bible’s words is by faith. Accepting the doctrine of Scripture’s truthfulness and authority is akin to accepting other doctrines in Scripture. As Packer states:

All scriptural affirmations are in fact divine utterances, and are through the Spirit apprehended as
such by faith. But among the affirmations of Scripture is the biblical doctrine of Scripture which we have surveyed; and one effect of the Spirit’s witnessing is to make men bow to this doctrine. The case is just the same as with any other article of faith... Just as the Spirit teaches all Christians to receive as authoritative articles of faith the doctrines which the Scriptures assert, so He teaches them to regard as an authoritative source of doctrine the Scriptures which assert them.3

Although it goes beyond the scope of our discussion here, this approach necessarily impacts on other aspects of the doctrine of Scripture such as the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture. Believing that the Bible is completely truthful and without error are likewise truths based on the trustworthiness of God and are again not aspects of the Bible we can empirically set out to prove decisively.10 They may be demonstrable and rationally justifiable but, because the Bible itself claims to be truthful and reliable,11 we come to the Bible with an a priori belief in its perfections, rather than seeking to prove it a posteriori from each successive text.12

To sum up thus far: we come to believe in the truthfulness and divine origin of the Bible through the internal testimony of the Spirit - the Spirit performs this work in our hearts as he opens our eyes to the glory of the gospel and brings us to faith in Christ.11 Scripture itself witnesses that it is from God directly and that all that it says is to be received as his Word. These are evident facts we are incapable of seeing without the Spirit’s illumination, but which, through his work, we come to hold by conviction. To concur with Packer again:

The effect of this witness is thus the self-authentication of Scripture to the Christian’s conscience. We conclude that where there is faith in Christ, and the Bible is known and read at all, there also, more or less explicit, is faith in Scripture as God’s written Word.14 However, this is not the end of the matter when it comes to the issue of how we seek to persuade others of the divine origin of the Bible.

External and internal justification

It has become common to talk about two sorts of defence for the Bible, two patterns of justification for the Bible being of divine origin. Here the work of Paul Helm is extremely helpful.15 Helm distinguishes between external justification - the view that the Bible can only be said to be of divine origin if it meets certain criteria established independently of it; and internal justification - the view that the Bible ought to be believed to be of divine origin on its own evidence.16

At first glance the thought of external justification is appealing - it would seem to offer non-arbitrary and generally accepted grounds for concluding that the Bible is the Word of God.
However, there are at least three main reasons why we must deem external justification to be highly problematic. Helm outlines these as:

1. Externalism assumes that there is some obvious, unquestionable test or criterion of what is appropriate for a divine revelation, or that there is some a priori standard of reasonableness that the Scriptures must meet. But who is to decide what this standard is?¹⁷

2. Accepting an external criterion as proof of the Bible's divine origin is necessarily compromising - it makes the authority of the Bible and of God dependent on other matters external to the Bible. Acceptance of the Bible as God's revelation is made to depend on other non-revealed matters.

3. Even at its best, externalism can only offer the probability that the Bible is God's Word - and this is not the kind of foundation on which Christian belief about the Scriptures is based.¹⁸

These problems with externalism lead us conversely into the area of internal justification and it is this position that I want to examine more closely. It is important to see that, if all the above arguments function negatively against externalism, the second argument above functions as a positive endorsement of internalism.

Further, it is vital to see that this argument is not merely a form of philosophical logic, but actually expresses some important theological truths about God, about Christ and about the words they speak. Hebrews 6:13 states that 'When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no-one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself...' This shows the principle that the validating source of something is always the higher and final authority; in this instance, when God himself wants to validate his words, he offers himself as validation for those words, since there is no higher authority. The same is true of Christ's words in John 8:14 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going.'

The point here is that, as Robert L. Reymond states, 'Jesus validated his claims by appealing to his knowledge of himself', exactly the same principle as in Hebrews 6:13.¹⁹ It is this, and not primarily logic, that demands that nothing external to God's words can validate God's words. If the Bible is God's Word, then it is a Word that is necessarily authoritative. This is not because of any proof that can be offered about it, but because it was God who spoke it. Primarily such biblical data lead to the conviction that the Bible is necessarily self-authenticating, self-evidencing, self-attesting and self-validating. They lead to Calvin's phrase, which we have already considered: 'God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word'.
The problem of circularity

This view, of course, raises the problem of whether such an approach to the Bible is based on a circular argument - it uses the Bible to validate the Bible! Some of the most thoughtful work in this area has been done by John Frame in his work *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. On this issue he states:

> Criticism [of circularity] is effective only when the critic can suggest a better way. But there is no alternative to circularity. First, allegiance to our Lord demands that we be loyal to Him, even when we are seeking to justify our assertions about Him. We cannot abandon our covenant commitment to escape the charge of circularity. Second, no system can escape circularity because all systems - non-Christian as well as Christian - are based on presuppositions that control their epistemologies, argumentation and use of evidence. Thus a rationalist can prove 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.

Frame also points out that circularity is only justifiable when arguing for the ultimate criterion in any system of thought; such reasoning is not a carte blanche for circularity at all points in all types of argument. But perhaps the most important point here is Frame's distinction between 'narrow' and 'broad' circularity.

A statement such as 'The Bible is the Word of God because it is the Word of God' is an example of 'narrow circularity'. Statements such as 'Scripture is the Word of God because in Exodus, Deuteronomy and elsewhere God indicates his desire to rule his people by a written text; because in 2 Timothy 3:16 and in 2 Peter 1:21 the Old Testament is identified with that covenantal constitution; because Jesus appointed the apostles to write authoritative words' - these are examples of more 'broad circularity' because this type of argument offers us more data.

We should note, however, that even this type of 'broad' circularity is closely related to the more 'narrow' type of statement, as both are what we might call testimony evidence. That is, in different ways they are both built on what God himself has said or testified about the Bible. The circle could then be broadened beyond this to include other internal evidence, such as the coherence or unity of Scripture and so forth; we will look at arguments like this shortly.

Very importantly, Frame argues that the circle can be broadened even more to include extrabiblical data: 'The Bible is the Word of God because archaeology, history, and philosophy verify its teachings.' However, Frame wishes to stress that these extrabiblical fields are not to be used in a value-neutral way, but only by presupposing that they are Christian sciences - the argument is still actually circular because we would be using archaeology, history and
philosophy that presuppose the biblical world view. We will come back to this issue of extrabiblical data later; here we must pause to consider the relationship between the above examples of narrow and broad circularity and what we have seen earlier about the internal testimony of the Spirit.

I propose that statements of the narrowly circular sort, such as 'The Bible is the Word of God because it is the Word of God' should be abandoned. They may be logically defensible, but it can be argued that it is not this sort of conviction that the testimony of the Spirit brings about. Rather, it is better to say that 'The Bible is the Word of God because it says it is the Word of God.' This may seem a very subtle distinction, but it changes the matter entirely. With the latter statement, belief in the Bible is grounded in something that, by faith, we believe God has said; as we have seen, that grounds our faith in the Bible in the veracity of God. Further, the Spirit's work of testifying to the Scriptures must be understood as that work which opens our minds to see all that Scripture evidences about itself and which we would not otherwise see.

The work of the Spirit does not lead us to have the conviction that the Bible is the Word of God without any reasons whatsoever, as if it were a kind of 'holy brainwashing'. This is what could lead to the statement 'The Bible is the Word of God because it is the Word of God.' Frame makes the point that the work of the Spirit is not in conflict with a rationality defined by a Christian epistemology. He states that sin

keeps us from acknowledging warranted conclusions, rational conclusions. The work of the Spirit is to remove those effects of sin, to overcome their resistance. The Spirit does not whisper to us special reasons that are not otherwise available...

Rather, we should understand the work of the Holy Spirit as causing us to see the reasons that are available, the internal evidence for the Bible being the Word of God. That evidence may be as 'narrow' as God's own word about the Scriptures ('The Bible is the Word of God because it says it is' - testimony evidence). Or it may be as 'broad' as the many other internal evidences that can be given - we might refer to these as material evidences. Historically, the various internal evidences for the Bible's divine origin have been variously expressed; perhaps one of the most famous is the Westminster Confession of Faith, which suggests that the ways by which the Bible evidences itself to be the Word of God are

the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the purpose of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full disclosure it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof.
These are the ways in which Scripture witnesses to us about its divine origin. We are incapable of seeing them without the witness of the Spirit - or, more precisely, incapable of seeing them as marks of divinity without the Spirit. Calvin outlines a similar argument and yet states very explicitly that such internal evidences are not primarily what make us sure about the Bible:

> once we have embraced [Scripture] devoutly as its dignity deserves, and have recognized it to be above the common sort of things, those arguments - not strong enough before to engraft and fix the certainty of Scripture in our minds - become very useful aids.

In the terms of our discussion here, what makes us certain of the Bible as the Word of God? It is the Spirit's testimony to the 'narrow' or foundational, internal testimony evidence that depends on the character of God and the word he speaks, together with the Spirit's testimony to the 'broad' or aiding, internal material evidence, as outlined in Calvin and the Westminster Confession.

Two questions and an illustration

To help us see the force of this argument about 'narrow' and 'broad' forms of internal evidence, it is helpful to make a distinction between two questions and it is vital to see that they should not necessarily be answered in the same way:

1. Why do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?

2. What evidence is there for believing that the Bible is the Word of God?

To see that these questions are different, consider the following illustration. If you were to ask me why I believe my wife loves me, I might reply either that I just know she does or that I know it because she says she does. Neither would be an inadequate answer and neither would call into question the reality of my wife's love, even though I have not given any substantial or material evidence beyond the testimony of her own word.

However, if you were then to ask me what material evidence there is that my wife loves me, I could happily list any number of ways in which by attitude, action, word and gesture my wife demonstrates that she loves me. But am I wrong not to base my belief in her love on the material evidence? Certainly not - we might want to suggest that, if there were no material evidence whatsoever, my belief in her love could be questioned. But that is not the same thing as saying that the ground of my belief in her love is the material evidence. In the sphere of human relations there is a 'knowing and being known' that does not formally depend on the material evidence for
that knowledge; there is, so to speak, a sense in which 'we just know' that something is true, not for no reason whatsoever, but because of the reality of the relationship.

The reason why we believe that the Bible is the Word of God is not in the first instance because of all the material evidence for the Bible being the Word of God. We might answer this question first by stating that we know the Bible is the Word of God because the Holy Spirit has opened our eyes to grasp by faith that it is true; or that because of faith we accept that the Bible is the Word of God because God says it is. This is internal, testimony evidence of the narrower kind outlined above. It is sufficient to warrant certainty, because the Spirit’s work has brought us into a relationship with the living God whereby we are sure, by faith, that certain articles of faith are true.

This argument is similar to that advanced by one of the proponents of Reformed epistemology, Alvin Plantinga, in that he suggests that Christians are warranted in their Christian belief by a three-stage process: by reading Scripture, being led by the Holy Spirit, and then receiving faith from the Holy Spirit. As people read the Bible, they receive the internal testimony of the Spirit and can pronounce in faith, ‘Yes, that’s right, that’s the truth of the matter; this is indeed the word of the Lord.’ However, contrary to Plantinga et al., that does not mean that it is invalid to speak of other positive reasons in the form of material evidence for the Bible being the Word of God. We must make the distinction between the ground of our faith in the Bible and the evidence for the Bible. The ground of our faith is explicitly theological: it is based on the gospel, the work of the Spirit, the testimony of God, and yet this faith is accompanied by material evidence.

Extrabiblical evidence

So far I have left more or less untouched the issue of extrabiblical evidence and its relationship to how we come to believe in the Bible. This is a complex area that poses many sophisticated epistemological problems. However, following Frame, I suggest that because Christianity contains propositional claims about God’s acts in history and because those claims are true, then God has left his fingerprints in our world. Two important points follow.

First, the Christian evidential argument can never be merely evidential. We should notice the presupposition in the preceding sentence, which means that we work outwards from the truth about God and the Bible to historical matters, rather than trying to evaluate neutrally all the data in history that will somehow lead us to God. I suggest it cannot be otherwise, given what we have seen about human blindness and the necessary work of the Spirit. Christian handling of evidence must always start from Christian presuppositions about the framework of interpretation for that evidence. Consider the issue of the resurrection of Jesus; here Frame is worth quoting in full:
In 1 Corinthians 15, the Resurrection is presented in the context of Old and New Testament Theology; it is not presented merely by using 'inductive evidence' apart from a theological framework of meaning. To be sure, Paul appeals to witnesses to establish the fact of the Resurrection (vv 3-14) but even that is presented as part of Paul's authoritative apostolic instruction (v3). The point is not so much that the Corinthians could verify the Resurrection for themselves by consulting the witnesses, though that is true and that fact does confirm what he says. Paul's point is rather that the testimony to the Resurrection was part of the apostolic preaching and is therefore to be accepted as part of that apostolic testimony. After making that point, Paul then gives an additional reason why the Resurrection ought to be believed: if it is denied, the whole doctrinal content of Christianity must also be denied (vv12-19). Paul then goes on to compare Christ with the Old Testament figure of Adam and Christ's redemption with the Old Testament description of man's sinful condition (vv20-22). Following that, Paul presents an even more theological discussion of the role that the Resurrection plays in the organism of revelation. Clearly, then, the Resurrection is no 'brute fact' and the grounds for believing it are not 'purely empirical' or 'purely inductive.' Empirical considerations, such as witnesses, play a role but the crucial point is that the Resurrection is central to the presuppositional revelation: we cannot consistently presuppose Christ if we deny the Resurrection.

This is relevant to our discussion because it is an example of how truths in Scripture are understood on the basis of scriptural pre-suppositions. I suggest that the same is exactly true of truths about Scripture.

To return to the illustration about my wife's love for me, if you were to ask me what material evidence there is that my wife loves me, I might reply by saying that she buys me theological books for my birthday. However, in many people's presuppositional frame-work (including my wife's!), buying theological books as a birthday present could be regarded as evidence of my wife if she regards me as a heretic and in need of some orthodox teaching.

Other people might regard a romantic meal or some new clothes as the proper evidence of love. The point here is to show that books count as evidence of love only within the presuppositional frame-work of our particular relationship and, even then, strictly speaking, only within my presuppositional framework. Presuppositions control how we interpret evidence and this means the Christian apologist cannot regard the presentation of evidence as a blank cheque that, when cashed, guarantees belief in the Bible. V. Philips Long makes the same point in his discussion of archaeology, a discipline often relied on either to prove or disprove the reliability of biblical history. He shows that the material remains unearthed by archaeology do not in fact speak at all, but must be interpreted on some basis: once the researcher begins to analyse the evidence, theoretical concerns begin to transform the archaeological evidence into an historical account. In this sense archaeological evidence, despite its brute factuality, is no more objective than any
other type of evidence.\textsuperscript{32}

The second thing to note here arises from a passage such as Romans 1. This outlines how the evidence about God in nature is ‘clearly seen’ and so leaves sinners ‘without excuse’ (Romans 1:20).

Although the passage raises a host of questions to do with general revelation and common grace,\textsuperscript{33} it is important to realize that Paul’s argument here is that the apprehension of God’s revelation of himself in creation has become marred by our sin - we are guilty of suppressing the truth we are presented with (Romans 1:18). This means that we must understand the Christian presentation of evidence, whether for the Bible or anything else of apologetic interest, to be a presentation of moral obligation. That is to say, as Frame states, the evidence rightly obligates consent. A believing response to this revelation is not merely optional; it is required ... Thus the evidential argument is demonstrative, not merely probable.\textsuperscript{34}

This is an important point, as it highlights that the essential apologetic task is not to achieve intellectual assent after all the evidence has been presented, but to call for faith and repentance. This is also another possible criticism of Reformed epistemology - it is concerned to establish epistemic rights, what we may believe, but says little about epistemic obligations, what we should believe.\textsuperscript{35}

'Classical apologetics' and Christ and the Bible

Before I come to some concluding reflections it will be helpful to consider an approach to the truth of the Bible known as ‘classical apologetics’ and to compare this with the influential work of John Wenham. Both schools of thought lead us to the vital issue of the role that Christ’s view of the Bible should have in our discussion.

The classical apologetics line, as represented by thinkers such as R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley,\textsuperscript{36} seeks to prove the divine origin of the Bible by taking as the starting premise the Bible’s general historical reliability. The argument runs as follows:

Premise 1. The Bible is a basically trustworthy document.

Premise 2. On the basis of this (generally) reliable document we have sufficient evidence to believe confidently that Jesus is the Son of God.
Premise 3: Jesus Christ, being the Son of God, is an infallible authority.

Premise 4.: Jesus Christ teaches that the Bible is more than generally trustworthy: it is the very Word of God.

Premise 5: The Word, in that it comes from God, is utterly trustworthy because God is utterly trustworthy.

Conclusion: On the basis of the infallible authority of Christ, the Church believes the Bible to be utterly trustworthy, infallible and authoritative.

This argument is important because it introduces the concept that Christ's teaching about the Bible is vital for our doctrine of Scripture. However, this route of getting to Christ's teaching is significantly flawed and should be rejected as an apologetic device.

R. L. Reymond states the case:

'I do not believe the progression is a valid argument in that the conclusion declares more than the original premise will allow. If one approaches these issues without Christian presuppositions, one can only conclude at best that the Bible is probably, or even possibly, God's Word.'

Similarly, John Frame adds:

'The [proponents of this view] overestimate, I think, the current scholarly consensus on the reliability of the Gospels. They assume that almost every NT scholar will concede that the Gospels are 'generally reliable.' I doubt it.'

Some scholars, of course, have argued well for the historical reliability of the Gospels and my argument does not mean to deny the validity of the historical-critical method in itself. Rather, my point here is to show that even this method of arguing for belief in the Bible simply locates the heart of the argument in the historical arena, and historical study cannot be allowed either to hold belief in the Bible hostage until all the evidence is in, or to expect to conduct its business entirely free of presuppositional interference. The classical apologetics position falls foul of accepting a supposedly 'neutral' approach to history and evidence, as if pre-suppositions can all somehow be set aside and the data be evaluated entirely free from interfering frameworks of interpretation for that history and evidence. From a more theological point of view, it is vital to note that the Christian does not believe that the Bible is God's Word simply because Jesus
taught that it was.

The fact that Jesus did teach this (Matthew 4:4,7,10; 19:4–5; 22:29; Luke 16:17; John 10:35; 16:12–14) is sometimes outlined among Christians as the primary reason why we believe the Bible is God’s Word, but this is not so. The issue must be decided further back than that - as we have seen, it is decided formally by the truthfulness of God and materially by the divine origin of the words.41

If Christians state that the reason they believe the Bible is authoritative is because Jesus said so, and unbelievers respond by asking how they know Jesus actually said the things those Gospel passages report, how would they respond? By arguing that there is good evidence that those passages are historical, as do Sproul et al.? But at the very least this would be exposing that the real reason why the believer believes the Bible is not because of Jesus' teaching, but because they hold that it is generally historically reliable. It is very helpful to compare this sort of reasoning about Christ and the Scriptures with the argument of John Wenham in his seminal work Christ and the Bible.42 It could be argued that Wenham is unclear about the starting point for his argument - he seems to be similar to the classical apologists with statements such as:

if the Gospels are substantially true, we are justified in regarding as historical those features in them which are often repeated and which are found in a variety of Gospel strata.44

However, this would be an unfair representation, as for Wenham it seems clear that how we come to believe that the Gospels are substantially true is actually a matter of faith. Consider the following lengthy quotation:

'[This argument] starts by accepting as valid the characteristic Christian experience of conversion. A convert from a non-Christian religion or from modern secular society seldom arrives at the decisive moment of faith with a view of biblical inspiration already formulated in his mind. His quest is a wrestling with the Christ portrayed in the New Testament and witnessed to by Christians. As he progresses in his search the Gospels seem to him more and more to have the ring of truth. At last he comes to the moment when he says, 'Lord, I believe.' He has arrived at faith with a conviction about the basic truth of the New Testament witness to Christ, but without necessarily any clear beliefs about the truth or falsity of many of the details or about the status of the Bible as a whole. God has become real to him in Christ through the external witness of the gospel and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. In conversion he has made the discovery that God, made known in Jesus Christ, is the centre and starting-point of all true knowledge. Growth in the knowledge of things of God (which includes progress in theological understanding) comes by holding fast to the centre and by working outwards from there (emphasis added). There is a progression: God; God revealing himself; God revealing himself supremely in Christ; Christ teaching the truth of Scripture; finally, with Scripture as a guide, the
Wenham's argument here is important as it helps us to make the distinction between faith in Christ through the gospel and faith in Christ's teaching about the Bible. The distinction here is not between two different faiths, but between the logical order of progression whereby we come to accept that the Bible is true. That is to say, it is saving faith in Christ that first of all gives conviction about the truth of Christ; and it is through this saving faith that the Holy Spirit is at work to bring conviction about the truth of the biblical witness to Christ. This is not an inadequate answer to the question of why we believe the Bible but, as we have seen in the illustration about my relationship with my wife, it does not have to be the end of the matter.

It can lead us to our next position - faith in Christ's teaching about the Bible. Christ's teaching about the Scriptures forms part of the material evidence for the divine origin of the Bible, but it is not the sole or even foundational reason why we believe the Bible. Jesus' teaching about the Scriptures shows us that the presupposition we have arrived at because of the work of the Spirit through the gospel, testifying to the veracity and character of God, is a correct presupposition to have. Before we even come to look at Jesus' teaching about the Bible we can be confident that those words that tell us what Jesus' teaching is, are true and authoritative words. This helps us to know how to respond to our unbelieving friends who ask how we know Jesus actually said the things those Gospel passages report. In the very first instance it is because of our conversion, because of faith, the gospel and the work of the Spirit. We believe that Jesus said the things the Bible claims he said because we believe in Jesus, we believe that the gospel is true and that the work of the Spirit is a reality in our experience.

At this point it is worth commenting on the alternative viewpoint I mentioned at the start, namely that the whole issue of arguing for belief in the truthfulness of the Bible is beside the point and obscures the fact that we are called to trust in Christ, not the Bible. This point is well taken if it is meant to highlight the dangers of bibliolatry and exalting the Bible above Christ. However, in much recent theology this viewpoint is expressed as a way of wanting to sit loose to some of the tricky issues about the full truthfulness and reliability of the Bible. It locates the authority of the Bible not in the fact of God speaking but in the person of Jesus Christ. This position should be resisted for a couple of reasons. First, this position does not go far enough in pressing home its own fundamental premise that the key issue with the Bible is to point us to faith in Christ through the gospel. Once we take this as our starting point we are bound then to ask what believing the gospel of Christ actually means. Peter Jensen explains:

‘The key consequence of accepting the gospel is, therefore, that Jesus Christ becomes our Lord, exercising the authority of his kingdom in our lives. From the gospel, we can see both what the nature of his authority must be and also the means by which he exerts it. The instrument of his authority is the word...’
This means that the Bible itself cannot be simply a witness to the authority of Christ without any inherent authority itself. It is the word of the Sovereign Lord. It is the means by which he exercises his sovereign rule over us. The words of the Bible carry the authority of the author. As Jensen shows, this is something we accept in everyday life as in the receiving of a letter from a good friend. We do not ignore the letter and say to our friend, 'I did not believe your words because they were not you.' On the contrary, as we treat the words so we treat the author of the words.\textsuperscript{47}

Furthermore, it could be added that at the very least the lordship of Christ obligates us to accept his own teaching about the Bible as being authoritative and trustworthy in its entirety.

A second criticism is that this position actually works with an illogical divide between the particular words of the Bible that tell us about Christ and the Bible's own theological claim that all its words are God's words. Not far beneath the surface here is discomfort with the traditional understanding of inspiration, perhaps due to a mistaken belief that regarding the whole of Scripture as the breathed-out words of God leads to a flattening of the diversity of the Bible and interpretive ignorance of its different literary genres. However, Timothy Ward has recently argued extremely cogently that, first, the traditional understanding of inspiration is more than equal to these criticisms and, second, that the primacy of Christ in the biblical revelation can actually only be secured by a robust belief in the sufficiency of the whole canon of Scripture to testify about him. As he states:

'If 'Jesus Christ' is set up as the sole unquestionable principle of the self-interpretation of Scripture, the 'centre' in the light of which other parts of Scripture are judged not to witness truly to him, to fall short of his gospel ...then the 'Jesus Christ' in terms of whom we read Scripture will be a Jesus Christ whose identity is formed for us only partly by Scripture - probably by those parts which most appeal to us.'\textsuperscript{48}

\textbf{Conclusion}

I am now in a position to offer a few reflections on some of the issues raised at the start of this chapter, and will draw the various strands of my argument together in the following four points:

1. It should be obvious by now that a coherent theology of belief in the Bible means that we do not have just a solitary argument for why we believe what we believe about the Bible. The issue facing us is not whether evidence has any role in our belief, or whether we must think only of the gospel and the work of the Spirit. Rather, the real challenge we face is to understand the theological relationship between matters such as the gospel, faith, internal and external evidence. It will be helpful to try to tease out a little of what the systematic relationship between
these topics actually means.

2. This essay has suggested that the foundational issue at stake here is actually the Christian gospel - the truth about Jesus Christ, our sin-blinded perception of reality, and our need of salvation from the wrath to come. In grasping the truth of the Bible, the work of the Spirit is paramount to enable us to embrace spiritual truths. This means that as we think about discrete topics such as why we believe in the Bible, our starting point must be to operate with the gospel as rationale and presupposition in all our thinking. The same is true in other matters of Christian belief, for example in giving a reason for the Christian world view on suffering, or other religions. At the heart of Christian thinking is belief in the gospel and how this acts all areas of epistemology and theological reflection. This essentially means that the discipline of apologetics, for instance, cannot afford to see itself as anything other than contextual evangelism. To return to Jo and Alex at the start of this chapter, Alex’s questions should actually be grasped as an opportunity to share the truth of the gospel as it pertains to belief in the Bible. For Jo to pretend that she believes because she understands and knows simply because of hard evidence, is to deny the reality that she knows because she has first believed - and her belief in Christ needs to be brought to bear on all the different issues related to belief in the Bible.

3. Further, to develop the issue of apologetics a little, what we have seen in this chapter means that the use of evidence for the Bible needs to be married to a solid understanding of how presuppositions function in arguing for biblical truth. It demands a creative apologetic that does not use evidence as the foundation or trump card in the armoury. We have no ‘brute’ or ‘plain’ facts that are somehow incontrovertible evidence for the truth of the Bible. Therefore, most importantly, we should exercise care in using evidence as the proof of biblical truth. Christian apologists may well find a role in their argument for stating, for instance, that archaeology shows that Gallio was the proconsul of Achaia as Acts 18:12 says. But it is incompatible with Christian belief about the Bible to give the impression that such archaeology is vital to our faith or somehow gives the Bible a reliability it did not have before the discovery was made. In short, what we are arguing for here is the integrity in apologetic presentation that our presuppositions demand - we must be prepared to argue that our belief in the Bible is not based on all the evidence for the Bible.

4. It follows closely from this that a theological understanding of evidentialism means that any presentation of evidence to do with revelation must be coupled with a presentation of the moral obligation that such evidence warrants. We are prone to think that the gospel calls for faith and repentance, while all the evidence for the Bible calls for only aroused interest or intellectual credibility. However, on Paul’s example in Acts, people’s ignorance in grasping both evidence and the meaning of that evidence is a culpable act of moral rebellion that leaves them facing God’s judgment. The Christian use of revelatory evidence cannot be ‘look and decide for yourself’, but ‘look and repent.’
Taken together, then, these points mean that Christian belief in the Bible rests on a number of different factors, all of which exist in a clear theological relationship to each other. The starting point of our faith in Christ means that our confidence is placed firmly in the gospel and the work of the Spirit. Through these means we are able to experience the 'utter certainty' about the Bible that Calvin described, 'just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself'. This gospel presupposition and rationale embraces the Bible's truthfulness and reliability because of God's truthfulness, because the Bible's words are God's words, and because Jesus himself regarded the Bible in this way. It works out from here to see all the internal evidence that the Scriptures are from God himself, and its examination of all the external evidence is coupled with the gospel presupposition that God has actually given us all the evidence we need to know that he is there and to believe in him.

Suggested Further Reading


Helm P., and C. R. Trueman (eds.), The Trustworthiness of God: Perspectives on the Nature of
Scripture (Leicester: Apollos, 2002).


Endnotes

1 Presuppositionalism is a position which holds that there are certain primary beliefs or truths that must be presupposed when approaching all other articles of knowledge. Evidentialism is a position which requires that evidence or reasons are necessary to hold belief rationally.

2 See the discussion in D.A. Carson, The Gagging of God (Leicester: Apollos, 1996) pp95-96, 184-189. Here various approaches to apologetics are discussed within the context of fresh challenges created by postmodernism.


“Fundamentalism”, p117

Ibid, pp119, 121.


It should be noted that this viewpoint says only that we believe in advance of the truthfulness of the text before we come to it, not the meaning of the text. It does not invalidate historical-grammatical exegesis and interpretation. See J.I.Packer, *God Has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1965) p105

See L.Berkhof, *Introductory Volume to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapis: Eerdmans, 1932), pp182-185, who states “We should bear in mind that the particular work of the Holy Spirit described by this name does not stand by itself, but is connected with the whole work of the Holy Spirit in the application of the redemption wrought in Christ”

“Fundamentalism”, p120

pp71-88

16 *Divine Revelations*, p73. Helm argues that though it is possible to combine these two positions, between them they exhaust the possible patterns of justification.


18 *Divine Revelation*, pp78-79.


21 Ibid., p131

22 Ibid.

23 Frame, “*Spirit and the Scriptures*”, p232.

24 Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.5

25 *Institutes*, 1.8.1, 82


27 Quoted in Rauser, *Let Reason by Your Guide*? p.41

28 See particularly the criticism of George Mavrodes, outlined in Frame, about Plantinga and Wolterstorff’s devaluing of positive apologetics, as well as Frame's own observations in “The


30 Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p143.

31 Ibid., pp146-147


34 *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, p142.


38 *New Systematic Theology*, pp74-75


41 See Packer “Fundamentalism”, p117

Ibid., p13.

Ibid., p14.


Peter Jensen, *The Revelation of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2002), p153. Jensen develops this by demonstrating the convental nature of Scripture and showing how this is God’s instrument for ruling the convenant people.

Ibid. p165.


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