

Faith as Belief Without Understanding

Let's ring in the New Year with a little Bahnsen burning...

A Deliberate Ambiguity

It should not be a surprise that presuppositional apologists tend to avoid the issue of faith in their skirmishes with Christianity's critics. When it does come up in debate, it is typically glossed over as casually as if it were no more than a preposition. It is as if the believer expects everyone to "just know" what is meant by the word. Why elaborate on something everyone "just knows" already? However, the reason why presuppositionalists are happy not to elaborate on the issue of faith is that it is riddled with so much confusion and conflict, and unlocking this confusion and conflict is sure to give away the game. Indeed, there are few things in Christianity that are riddled with more lack of clarity than the meaning and role of faith (those which are even more confused would be the issues of salvation, justification, atonement, etc.). Some apologists often like to blame non-believers for this confusion, treating them like spoilsports who stubbornly refuse to just go along with the scheme by asking troublesome questions. But occasionally an apologist will acknowledge that believers themselves are often responsible for the persisting and embarrassing quagmire arising from the bible's total and unflinching embrace of faith. But even those occasional few are powerless to remedy the situation.

Both as a former Christian and now as a critic of Christianity, my long-held impression is that Christians themselves are confused about the nature and function of faith, given their own statements as an indication of their level of understanding. There are two basic reasons for this confusion.

One is that the bible is painfully ambiguous in its use of the word 'faith'. It uses 'faith' in a wide variety of contexts with no consistent meaning. Even when we get to the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, which is often cited as providing an authoritative definition of 'faith', it gives us confusion or worse. It defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (v. 1). This definition seems to have been designed to play a trick on the mind of the eager believer. Hoping for something does not produce assurance. I could hope for a million dollars, but there's no assurance in this of receiving it. Needless to say, my hoping does not assure its own fulfillment. Similarly, "things not seen" does not give a man conviction. Objectively speaking, I do not "see" myself breathing water one day if I should happen to drive my car into the frigid waters of the Columbia River, but imagining ("seeing the unseen") that I will breathe water does not give me the conviction that I will have this ability should my survival require it. O me of little faith? Elsewhere the word faith seems deliberately vague and tends to have a new meaning with each author, sometimes signifying belief (cf. Mt. 8:5-10, Rom. 4:5), sometimes implying the means by which belief or knowledge is acquired (cf. I Cor. 2:5f; II Cor. 5:7), sometimes meaning a mental power to alter a present state of affairs (cf. Mt. 15:22-28; 17:20, etc.), sometimes referring to an act of will (cf. Heb. 11), sometimes suggesting a mystical faculty by which one allegedly receives revelatory transmissions from supernatural sources (cf. Rom. 1:17, 10:6). Still other passages, such as those telling stories of miracle cures of blindness, palsy or other ailments, give the impression that believing something (e.g., "having faith") will make it so. For instance, apparently if I believe (or "have faith") that my nearsightedness will be corrected, it should be corrected. If it is not corrected, it must be due to my not believing strongly enough - i.e., having too little faith. But [when Christian believers themselves were invited to pray for this correction](#), no correction came about. Perhaps they did not pray, or perhaps they did not have sufficient faith. Or, it could be that their teaching is simply wrong. At any rate, with such a wide variety of meanings, given its varying use, it is no wonder that Christians would be confused by what faith is supposed to really mean.

The other reason for their confusion is that Christians are not honest to themselves about the nature of their beliefs and the means by which those beliefs are accepted as secured truths. Indeed, it is this same dishonesty which conflicted the authors of the bible and led to their use of the term as we find it in their stories and teachings. They are not honest about their beliefs because they are not honest about reality. At the most fundamental level of knowledge they want to believe that reality conforms to the consciousness of a being they can only imagine, which constitutes a double error. First they confuse their imagination with reality by supposing that what they imagine is actually real, and second they assume the metaphysical primacy of consciousness by granting to the being they imagine conscious power over the universe. Believers as well as non-believers can sense this dishonesty, but few acknowledge it, and even fewer are willing to put their finger on it. The pathological dishonesty comes in the form of

trying to defend and propagate such a view. This is where the trickery of theological casuistry, which I will briefly survey below, comes in. Judging by what Christian theologians, apologists and believers say about faith, one can easily get the impression that faith is a very complicated matter. The truth of the matter, however, is not at all so complicated. In fact, all the confusion that Christians have built up around the word faith over the decades and centuries is intended to hide a truth that is too uncomfortable for them to bear.

Now it must be borne in mind that faith is always viewed positively in the bible, for it never seems to allow faith to be the instrument of the damned. The bible's fantastical stories and teachings associate faith with "the righteousness" of the Christian god (cf. Rom. 3:22, 4:5, 13, Phil. 3:9), which is seen to be the source of all virtue, while the damned are associated with deceit and deception. So we should expect Christians to defend the doctrine of faith, regardless of how confused and complicated the bible's and their statements may be, for this is a major pillar in their worldview and thus integral to the confessional investment that they are determined to protect at all costs. They have to defend it, because the bible affirms it. I would not be surprised if a lot of apologists would secretly prefer that the bible not be filled with so many mentions of faith, for it makes their task not only insurmountably difficult, but in fact quite embarrassing to adult thinkers.

For the Record

In seeking the definition of faith that is assumed by presuppositional apologetics, I turned to Greg Bahnsen's mammoth *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*. There, I thought, I would find the definitive presuppositionalist ruling on the matter. I flipped to the index, and under the heading "faith" I found a reference to its "definition" on page 115, footnote 83. When I saw this, my hopes were stoked, and I thought "Aha! Maybe Bahnsen does give a definition of 'faith' in his master tome!" I quickly turned to page 115 and read the following statement under note 83:

Notice here how all claims about 'faith' are taken as referring to the same kind of thing, namely, adopting an outlook that is mysterious, unreasoned, or unprovable. Different people do not necessarily mean the same thing by 'faith' any more than they do by 'love'.

This is very disappointing, but unfortunately not at all surprising. As I pointed out above, many Christians mean different things by "faith," and I think this is ultimately the bible's fault. One would expect if not simply hope that those Christians who want to spread Christian belief and who also acknowledge the fact that "different people do not necessarily mean the same thing by 'faith'," would make an effort to bring both clarity and finality to the issue. But notice that note 83 on page 115 of Bahnsen's book does not even give a definition of 'faith'! This was the only point referenced in the index of Bahnsen's massive tome as giving a definition of 'faith'. Presuppositionalists like Bahnsen seem to complain a lot when thinkers, whether Christian or non-Christian, mean something by 'faith' that they don't like (for instance, they spit and stammer when non-believing critics view faith and reason as mutually opposed). But why merely complain? Why not try to correct the record? Why not lay out a clear definition of 'faith'? I know what reason is, and I have a good idea of what faith is. Fundamentally, reason stands on the primacy of existence, while faith assumes the primacy of consciousness. The fact that faith's metaphysical premises contradict those of reason is what is responsible for the millennia-old conflict.

Even John Frame, in his [A Van Til Glossary](#), does not give an entry for defining 'faith'. When faith appears, it is in the definition of a term denoting a view that presuppositionalists verbally reject, which is *fideism*, the "belief that God is known by faith and not by reason." Of course, the glossary does not include a definition of 'reason' either, and neither does the bible, so we may never know what Christians mean when they use the word 'reason'. By not offering definitions of their key terms, Christian apologists can always respond to their critics by saying "that's not what we mean." But what they do mean always remains shrouded in mystery. One can be forgiven for getting the impression that they don't know themselves what they mean.

Belief Without Understanding

Let's have a look at some other statements by Bahnsen to see just what a confused mess presuppositionalists are standing in. Remember, my task here is to find out just what Bahnsen thinks faith is, what its role might be, how it works in the believer's epistemology, and what inferences can be drawn from what is stated.

For Bahnsen, faith is essentially just another word for *belief*. He writes:

To 'have faith' that something is true (e.g., that Elvis is alive and residing in Idaho) is the same as 'believing' that the claim in question is true; these are different semantic ways of expressing the same thing. Accordingly, when a person says he 'believes' something 'simply on faith' (without specifying further), he has merely told us that 'he believes because he believes'. (*Always Ready*, p. 202n.1)

It should be noted that Bahnsen does not cite any passages from the bible to support his equation of faith with belief, and some Christians might even find this move objectionable. The examples of faith in Hebrews 11, for instance, do not seem to be examples of belief, but rather powers of will (and as such, they are examples of Christianity's commitment to the primacy of consciousness). Nonetheless, Bahnsen has made his position clear for the record. He also states that faith (which now we understand to be *belief*) is fundamental. He writes:

Faith is the precondition of a proper understanding... faith precedes knowledgeable understanding. (*Ibid.*, p. 88)

So, faith is belief, and this belief must come before "a proper understanding" since it is "the precondition" thereof. This could only mean that, as a belief, faith must be accepted *before* one understands what it is he is accepting as truth. Thus faith is belief *without* understanding, for it comes *before* any understanding. So, accordingly, the Christian starts out accepting as truth a belief claim which he does not understand and thus could not know whether or not it is true. On this measure, it makes no difference what the content of that belief may be, for at this point the believer is in no position to tell the difference between truth and falsehood. It is at this point, before the believer can distinguish between fact and fiction, that Christianity seeks to nab human minds and invest them with its belief program. This is why Christian adults are so eager to get a hold of people's children, for it is while they are children that a human being is suggestible, moldable, vulnerable to fictitious beliefs and defenseless before the presumed authority of predatory adults who have themselves fallen for Christianity's deceptive gimmicks.

Believing a claim before understanding it (and thus before knowing whether or not it is true) is the basic model of conversion: get the new convert to make a belief commitment before he understands everything. Then slowly unravel the "mysteries" in small doses, so that he doesn't question them or, worse, exit the front doors of the church in an act of self-preservation.

Christians do not want to admit that they have no understanding, they simply want to make their faith a fundamental requirement to understanding. While faith is belief without understanding, the "understanding" comes later, after the commitment has been cinched. Why believe it? Well, not because it is thought to be true, but because of fear, specifically the fear of any consequences which might occur if it is not believed. John 4:18 explains the motivation for believing without knowledgeable understanding:

He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

If an individual does not believe the religious man's claims (regardless of whether or not he understands them or thinks they are true), he is "condemned already," as if he were utterly worthless because of his "failure" to believe. This is the primacy of consciousness making its debut into epistemology: what one *believes* is eternally all-determining, for believing is sufficient to make it so. If one *believes*, he is "not condemned"; if he does *not* believe, he is "condemned already." One's actions and choices are of no moral consequence, for what one *believes* trumps what one *does*. This helps explain why so many believers in Christianity are found on the wrong side of the law.

Notice how Bahnsen's interpretation of Proverbs 1:7 corroborates my analysis. He writes:

"The beginning (i.e., the first and controlling principle) of knowledge is the fear (or reverent submission) of the Lord" (Prov. 1:7). (*Always Ready*, p. 87)

Submission is an action, one performed by choice unless one is forced against his will. If an act of submission, whether chosen or forced, is itself "the beginning of knowledge," this could only mean that the act of submitting was undertaken without the benefit of knowledge, for it purportedly comes before any knowledge has been acquired. Thus it was a mindless act of submission, and this mindless act is the foundation of the believer's "knowledge." Knowledge of what? Who knows. Does it really matter at this point? The believer sure doesn't know (cf. Frame), for what his worldview calls knowledge, is nothing close to real knowledge, for real knowledge does not base itself on mindless actions of will. As Frame admits of Christian believers, "We know without knowing how we know." ([Presuppositional Apologetics: An Introduction \(Part I\)](#))

Frame makes this statement when trying to answer the question “How did Abraham come to know that the voice calling him to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22:1-18; cf. Heb. 11:17-19; James 2:21-24) was the voice of God?” Frame’s own ignorance of how one can know that the voice he might hear in his head are “the voice of God” should not surprise us. But it is not an accident when Bahnsen tells us “There can be no doubt that Scripture sets forth Abraham to us as the paradigm of faith.” (*Always Ready*, p. 91) Even though the Old Testament story in [Genesis 22](#) of Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac nowhere chalks up Abraham’s actions to faith, Abraham is seen in the New Testament as the exemplary model of faith, but how did he know that the voice in his head commanding him to sacrifice his own son was “the voice of God”? Who knows! The underlying message here is: it doesn’t matter *how* one knows (i.e., epistemology is for the dogs), what matters is that he *believes*. Knowledge and faith are thus contrary vehicles of cognition.

Now of course, all this explains why thinkers throughout history have considered faith to be opposed to reason, for reason does not threaten individuals to accept its conclusions on the basis of fear. Reason enables a thinker to think for himself, allowing him to draw his own conclusions and form his own judgments independent of any threats that others might pronounce against him. Of course, this independence of one’s mental self-conduct is condemned by presuppositionalism as “autonomous thinking,” and rightly so given what’s at stake for Christianity: intellectual liberty will only break the spell of god-belief if allowed to flourish. Theologians and apologists, however, look for ways to conceal their animosity for intellectual liberty while posing as the mind’s defenders.

A Hapless Contradiction

But is Bahnsen himself consistent with his own conception of faith as a precondition for knowledgeable understanding? Other statements from the same book indicate that even he was prone to forgetfulness when it comes to keeping the party line straight. The issue which throws him is, ironically, the hierarchical nature of knowledge itself, for it is here where we find Bahnsen’s constant breaching. I say “ironically” because the alleged thrust of “presuppositionalism” is to peer below the level of casual assumptions one takes for granted, to dig into the soil of those “presuppositions” which underlie beliefs resting at the surface of one’s worldview. When presuppositionalists themselves are so clumsy with the knowledge hierarchy, it can only indicate that something is wrong.

Consider the following statement by Bahnsen:

As J. Gresham Machen boldly put the matter in his book, *What is Faith?*, “we believe that Christianity flourishes not in the darkness, but in the light.” Machen wrote that “one of the means which the Spirit will use” to bring a revival of the Christian religion “is an awakening of the intellect.” He fervently resisted “the false and disastrous opposition which has been set up between knowledge and faith,” arguing that “at no point is faith independent of the knowledge upon which it is logically based. (*Always Ready*, p. 195)

Notice that last statement in particular: “at no point is faith independent of the knowledge upon which it is logically based.” This explicitly affirms that some knowledge logically precedes faith, and that faith logically depends on that prior knowledge. How can this be integrated with the view expressed earlier in Bahnsen’s book that “faith is the precondition of a proper understanding,” that “faith precedes knowledgeable understanding” (p. 88)? These statements tell us that there can be no knowledge which precedes faith, but the Machen statement that Bahnsen approvingly quotes tells us that there’s no faith without the prior “knowledge upon which it is logically based.” In one moment faith is fundamental, in the next is not fundamental.

Bahnsen devotes a whole chapter in his book *Always Ready* to discussing “The Problem of Faith” (pp. 193-203). But it is most unhelpful. In it Bahnsen seeks to challenge the well-warranted suspicion that faith and reason are in conflict, but he fails completely in defending the claim that “the content of our faith is what any reasonable man should endorse” because accepting that content on the basis of faith, by his own admissions, can only mean that he is in no position to even know whether what he accepts is fact or fiction, or “completely accords with logic,” or that “without the Christian worldview ‘reason’ itself becomes arbitrary or meaningless - becomes unintelligible” (p. 196). Christianity’s own commitment to the primacy of consciousness metaphysics guarantees that Bahnsen’s view is false. Moreover, Bahnsen does not even give a clear indication of what faith is, other than that it is merely another word for *belief*. So why do we need two words to mean the same thing? Earlier in his book, as pointed out above, he claims that “faith is the precondition to a proper understanding” and that it “precedes knowledgeable understanding” (p. 88), but neither there or in the present chapter does he explain why this is the case, nor what exactly faith is. Is he merely saying that *belief* is a precondition to understanding? If so, why doesn’t he just say that?

Faith and Imagination

There are strong, repeated indications that the word 'faith' is used as a disguise for relying on one's imagination instead of reason to justify his claims and beliefs. It is clear enough from examples in the bible, such as when Peter learns that he can walk on water by having sufficient faith (cf. Mt. 14:26-31; this pericope is obviously one of Matthew's elaborations on the more primitive model found in Mark 6), that imagination is involved in faith. Peter, seeing Jesus walk on the water, had to imagine himself doing the same thing. And reality obeyed accordingly, so long as he kept up the imagination in his mind, i.e., so long as he had "faith."

Bahnsen unwittingly corroborates this point when he writes:

Faith does not rely upon man's autonomous thinking and what it "sees" but rather begins with a presuppositional conviction about the veracity of God's word. That which is not seen in human ability is *seen by faith* which submits to the Lord's self-attesting word (Heb. 11:27).

Now what faculty of the mind can "see" something "which is not seen in human ability"? Walking on unfrozen water, healing the blind by spitting into their eyes, turning water into wine, feeding 5,000 people with just a handful of bread loaves and fishes, casting mountains into the sea, and raising the dead from the grave, are "not seen in human ability." So we cannot objectively look out at the world and find evidences of such things (i.e., we cannot "see" these things through "autonomous thinking"). To "see" these things, one must turn inward, into the subjective contrivances of the imagination. There "anything can happen," which is the signature notion of god-belief (cf. [the cartoon universe of theism](#)).

Faith, then, is code for granting belief the power of altering the believer and/or the believed. Since "autonomous thinking" - i.e., relying on one's own perception and reasoning to identify reality according to facts gathered from the objects of perception and draw inferences about what is real in the world on the basis of objective inputs - is to be regarded as "foolishness" (cf. Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, pp. 55-57 et al.), an alternative approach is called for. In place of objective inputs gathered from the world around us by means of sense perception, faith lets the imagination loose on one's cognition, supplanting facts with fictions wherever it sees fit. If the facts that "autonomous thinking" discovers do not fit the religious doctrine, well, to hell with facts! Faith sees to it that facts need not get in the way of belief. On the Christian view, faith has the power to turn everything around. Simply by believing a prescribed set of claims, one can be cured of all kinds of ailments, both physical and moral, whether it is drug addiction, wife-beating, brain tumors, incontinence or irregularity. Just believe, and everything will be alright, is the lesson we are to learn from Christianity.

For instance, consider the following:

Rom. 3:22: "Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference."

Rom. 4:5: "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness."

Just believe - or "just have faith" - and you're automatically included in the league of the just, just like that. It doesn't matter what you've done or the damage you may have caused others. You can be "justified" simply by signing on with the bandwagon of faith. That's an irresistible incentive to "believe" for those who seek the unearned in redemption.

Now consider: if one wanted to claim that the unreal is real, and he was called to explain (cf. "account for") how he *knows* it, what answer could he give which both conceals and protects his deception? He would not come out and admit that his claims are not true, for he wants others to believe what he claims. To the extent that he would identify his means of knowledge, he would also have to conceal the fact that he was trying to evade reality. And since there is no means to identify other than his imagination and desire to deceive, his answer will need to appeal to something other than reason, maybe even come up with ways of discounting reason, such that his audience is discouraged from using reason as a means of evaluating his claims. A lie needs an additional lie to support it, so he makes up a fictitious means of knowledge by claiming to have received this knowledge from an unreal source, stamped with the guarantee of that unreal source's alleged authority. Christianity provides a blueprint for just this

kind of intellectual fraud.

Faith-talk, then, signals the call to retreat into the imagination of god-belief, and along with this a long tradition of deceit. It is when one insists on taking an objective approach that one finds himself on the wrong side of faith. See for instance the following passage in Romans 9:31-33:

But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumblingstone; as it is written, Behold, I lay in Sion a stumblingstone and rock of offence: and whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed.

The “stumblingblock” in mind here is encountered when one misses the cue to dive into his imagination in order to “understand” the doctrinal point in question, for “faith is the precondition of a proper understanding” and “faith precedes knowledgeable understanding” (Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 88). If “to 'have faith' that something is true... is the same as 'believing' that the claim in question is true” (Ibid., p. 202n.1), then as a “precondition for a proper understanding” faith is *belief without understanding*. And since faith is said to be “the substance of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1) and this enables one to see “that which is not seen in human ability” (*Always Ready*, p. 92), the substance of faith can only be imagination.

by Dawson Bethrick

Labels: [Faith](#), [imagination](#)

posted by [Bahnsen Burner](#) at [6:00 PM](#)

15 Comments:

[Lisa](#) said...

Hi. I'm a freelance writer who profiles people with an emphasis on their religious ideas. I found your blog and would like to include you in the project. If you're interested in being interviewed (it's short and via e-mail), shoot me an e-mail at lacockrel@yahoo.com and I'll give you more details. -- Lisa Ann Cockrel

[January 02, 2007 8:37 AM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

Dawson,

I read the first three or four paragraphs, laughed, and then skimmed the rest.

One question though (more of a procedural question): why attempt to find a definition of 'faith' (or what the Bible means by it) in *apologetics* books? Why not interact with the Westminster Confession/Catechisms, Calvin, Turretin, Dabney, Hodge, Shedd, Berkhof, or the many other Reformed Systematic Theologies that Bahnsen and Frame et al would most likely agree with?

[January 02, 2007 2:33 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

GF76,

I read your entire comment and laughed, without skimming anything.

You ask why I would look in an apologetics book for a definition of 'faith'. Well, why not? After all, Bahnsen supplies definitions for other terms in his books. Why would it be inappropriate to see if and how he defined 'faith', which is so central to the Christian religion? I consulted Bahnsen's book because I wanted to know how Bahnsen defines 'faith'. If you read through my post before giving up and blanking out, you'll see that I quote Bahnsen saying: "Different people do not necessarily mean the same thing by 'faith' any more than they do by 'love'." (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 115n.83.) Thus he seems to have been aware of the need to make the meaning of the term clear. Also, in his book *Always Ready*, which is also an apologetics book, he provides a lengthy footnote -

from which I quoted (p. 202n.1) - indicating that he thinks 'faith' is just another word for 'believe'. Since the purpose of my post was to survey specifically what presuppositionalists mean by the term, consulting Bahnsen's writings seems most appropriate to me. Now Bahnsen does say a number of things about faith, but if you read through my post, you'll see that he only adds to the confusion.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 02, 2007 3:50 PM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

I read through your post and unfortunately for you, but I not only own but have read those books you referenced and cited. Here's just one instance of sloppiness on your part:

You say that "Of course, the glossary does not include a definition of 'reason' either, and neither does the bible, so we may never know what Christians mean when they use the word 'reason'. By not offering definitions of their key terms, Christian apologists can always respond to their critics by saying "that's not what we mean."

Maybe you should check Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought by Frame, which is one of the references for "A Van Til Glossary". Page 141 if you need help.

These types of instances and misinterpretations can be multiplied. From past experience, I find this to be all too common with you, Dawson, and is why I find it hard to take you seriously.

In your comment you state, "If you read through my post before giving up and blanking out, you'll see that I quote Bahnsen saying: "Different people do not necessarily mean the same thing by 'faith' any more than they do by 'love'." (Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis, p. 115n.83.) Thus he seems to have been aware of the need to make the meaning of the term clear."

Context is important, Dawson. Again, misinterpretation is all too common with you. At this point, Bahnsen is actually explaining what Van Til is saying. This refers to a 'starting point' that is taken as unprovable. In the text, Van Til notes that believers *and* nonbelievers have this type of faith (similar to an axiom). So this is not a theological definition of the term.

Why not, you ask? It seems that you were having a hard time finding a satisfactory definition by Bahnsen in the works you were looking at and since he not only was a presuppositionalist but Reformed as well, why not go to other sources? News flash - A reformed presuppositionalist is not going to differ from what the Reformed theologians have said about saving faith (or they would be branded as heretics), though their philosophical leanings may vary. You even state, "Moreover, Bahnsen does not even give a clear indication of what faith is, other than that it is merely another word for belief." Maybe a systematic would give you a clearer indication of what faith is.

I never said nor implied it was "inappropriate" per se, but you may find what you are looking for had you gone to a systematic.

[January 03, 2007 7:57 AM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

Interesting how it is so tricky to find out what exactly Christians (the real ones, of course) mean by their common terms such as 'faith.'

GF's comments simply illustrate this absurdity.

So...an unbeliever can't get their info from the Bible, from apologetics books, from commentaries, but must turn to the confessions and articles that men wrote hundreds of years ago to help make this gibberish "make sense."

Not convincing.

[January 03, 2007 1:14 PM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

Not reformed,

I guess I'm missing it, but I'm not sure how any of my comments implied that "an unbeliever can't get their info from the Bible, from apologetics books, from commentaries, but must turn to the confessions and articles that men wrote hundreds of years ago to help make this gibberish "make sense.""

The only interesting thing is how 'tricky' it is for some unbelievers to correctly represent their interlocutors. There are plenty more instances in this blog entry alone.

[January 03, 2007 1:36 PM](#)

[Not Reformed](#) said...

GF,

you said above:

*"why attempt to find a definition of 'faith' (or what the Bible means by it) in *apologetics* books? Why not interact with the Westminster Confession/Catechisms, Calvin, Turretin, Dabney, Hodge, Shedd, Berkhof, or the many other Reformed Systematic Theologies that Bahnsen and Frame et al would most likely agree with?"*

Do apologetic books not contain information about Christian theology? Do they not 'argue' for the faith, and its whatever particular flavor of christianity that apologist prefers?

If Dawson, or myself, or some other generic unbeliever brings up an issue with Christianity from a reading of the Bible, we're told we aren't representing it correctly. If we point to Christian apologists words, we aren't representing them correctly. If I pick a reformed commentary, than a pentacostal will say I'm not representing Christianity properly. You get the point.

Men have written libraries of blather to try and make sense of the wackiness of "the Word." Then comes the fun of yelling "NOT IT!" when an unbeliever has an objection, and points to one of these books.

Bleh.

[January 03, 2007 1:45 PM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

Not reformed,

Maybe you missed it but Dawson was attempting to argue against Bahnsen, Frame, and a Reformed understanding of 'faith'. If you want to argue against Pentecostals then correctly represent *their* views. If you want to critique the Reformed, then correctly represent *their* views.

Anyhow, I'm still not sure how my comments entail or imply "that an unbeliever can't get their info from the Bible, from apologetics books, from commentaries, but must turn to the confessions and articles that men wrote hundreds of years ago to help make this gibberish "make sense."" As a matter of fact, I said that it was not "inappropriate per se" to go to apologetics books.

I'm still not sure how your comments are germane to this discussion.

[January 03, 2007 2:08 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

1) GF76 writes "unfortunately for you, but I not only own but have read those books you referenced and cited." How this is unfortunate for me is not clear. In fact, I see this as a benefit for both myself and for my readers. If I have misquoted a source, for instance, those who have access to that source are able to correct me. But GF76 does not show where I have misquoted anything. On the contrary, what he states simply corroborates what I have presented in my blog, as I will make clear in the following.

2) GF76 calls it "sloppiness" when I point out that Frame does not include a definition of 'reason' in his [glossary](#). But

how is this an example of "sloppiness"? Either Frame includes a definition of 'reason' in his glossary, or he doesn't. I can see his charge of "sloppiness" sticking if in fact Frame actually did include a definition of 'reason' in his glossary, but he didn't. That Frame defines the term in one of his books does not overturn the fact that he doesn't in his glossary. I consulted Frame's Glossary because, well, it's a glossary!

3) I'm more than happy to consult Frame's book on the matter, but this will not expose "sloppiness" on my part, for my statement was about his glossary, not his book. But I thank GF76 for pointing out p. 141 of Frame's *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*. I have this book too. Curiously, here's what Frame writes on 141 of his book:

"We will now look at Van Til's view of human reason. I do not believe that Van Til defines *reason* anywhere, but it is clear that he views it primarily as a human capacity or faculty. [As opposed to what?] Specifically, reason is the capacity of a person to think and act according to logical norms, including the capacity to form beliefs [from what?], draw inferences [from what?], and formulate arguments [from what?]. The adjective *rational* can pertain to such thinking (and the resulting beliefs, inferences, and arguments) and acting, as well as to the person and his intellectual faculty."

Notice how Frame acknowledges that Van Til may not have provided a definition of 'reason' in his works. However, in *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til does quote Hodge on the matter:

"When Hodge speaks of *reason* he means 'those laws of belief which God has implanted in our nature'." (p. 81)

So here we're back to a mystical conception of reason, which provides no guide for the mind to distinguish between reality and imagination.

For contrast, consider Rand's definition of reason:

"Reason is the faculty that identifies and integrates the material provided by man's senses." ("The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 20)

She briefly explains this as follows:

"Reason integrates man's perceptions by means of forming abstractions or conceptions, thus raising man's knowledge from the *perceptual* level, which he shares with animals, to the *conceptual* level, which he alone can reach. The *method* which reason employs in this process is *logic* - and logic is the art of *non-contradictory identification*." ("Faith and Force: The Destroyers of the Modern World," *Philosophy: Who Needs It*, p. 62)

For Rand, *rationality* is:

"the recognition and acceptance of reason as one's only source of knowledge, one's only judge of values and one's only guide to action." ("The Objectivist Ethics," *The Virtue of Selfishness*, p. 25)

Notice how Rand firmly establishes reason by putting man's mind in touch with reality, i.e., the realm of existence of which he has awareness by means of sense perception. Perception is man's primary means of awareness, and it is the basis of an objective epistemology, for it puts us in direct contact with the objects of cognition. The "logical norms" of Frame's conception of reason are of no use to us if the content to which they are sourced in one's imagination. This is one of the primary concerns of my post.

4) GF76 says that "these types of instances and misrepresentations can be multiplied," but so far he's not shown that I have misrepresented anything. Did I misrepresent Frame's glossary? No, I did not. Would it be inappropriate to include an entry for 'reason' in his glossary? I certainly don't think so, unless of course reason is not very important to its author. I'm inclined to suppose that its omission may not be accidental. But if it was accidental, then it seems Frame himself is the one who was sloppy by not including it in his lexicon. And yet we do not see GF76 complaining about Frame's sloppiness.

5) In spite of not finding any actual instances of misrepresentation on my part, GF76 states (addressing me): "I find this to be all too common with you... and is why I find it hard to take you seriously." If GF76 finds it hard to take me seriously, why does he take me seriously? It is good for him to try to overcome his prejudices, but I'm curious about his motivation. Typically, when I do not take someone seriously, I ignore him.

6) Bahnsen's footnote 83 on page 115 comes at the tail end of the following statement, which begins a new

paragraph:

”And then it is added that science, too, needs to build itself on faith.”

It is at this point that Bahnsen feels the need to insert his footnote, which is referenced in the index of his book under “Faith, definition,” but which remarks that “different people do not necessarily mean the same thing by ‘faith’ any more than they do by ‘love’.” Again GF76 accuses me of misrepresentation, but what exactly I’m allegedly misrepresenting is not clear. As I pointed out in my previous comment, I take this footnote as an acknowledgement that the meaning of faith is not always clear. I do not think this is stretching anything that Bahnsen has stated. GF76 says that “Bahnsen is actually explaining what Van Til is saying,” but my impression is not so confident. On the contrary, it seems that Bahnsen is doing quite the opposite, namely muddying the waters a bit. At any rate, when Van Til asks (proceeding after the point of Bahnsen’s footnote) “Did not Aristotle show how all first principles are adopted by faith?” it seems that Van Til had in mind what Aristotle meant by faith, for here he wants his premise echoed from ancient Greece. Van Til seems happy to assume that he and Aristotle have the same thing in mind. This is another reason why Bahnsen’s footnote is troubling. Was Bahnsen not as content as Van Til apparently was to assume that we all have the same thing in mind?

7) GF76 says that “this [presumably ‘faith’?] refers to a ‘starting point’ that is taken as unprovable. In the text, Van Til notes that believers *and* nonbelievers have this type of faith (similar to an axiom).” Again, it’s not clear what is meant by ‘faith’ here; is it mere belief, or is it closer to what the bible means by ‘faith’ in Hebrews 11:1? A starting point would be unprovable by virtue of it being a starting point - i.e., because it comes logically prior to proof and proof must assume its truth. But unprovability as such does not make a position a starting point. I cannot prove the statement “Geusha is the supreme being of the universe,” but this would not make the statement “Geusha is the supreme being of the universe” a proper starting point. For more details on what a proper starting point is, see [Probing Mr. Manata’s Poor Understanding of the Axioms](#).

8) Even if we accept the view that faith is just another word for belief, an axiom, properly understood, is not accepted on faith. I.e., an axiom (in the Objectivist sense of a fundamental recognition of a basic, perceptually self-evident fact of reality) is not accepted on the basis of some prior belief (whose basis is in who knows what). The only thing that comes prior to an axiomatic concept is perceptual awareness and the choice to identify what is perceived. This is not “belief-motivated” because no beliefs have been formed yet. Properly understood, an axiom identifies a perceptually self-evident fact. We are not aware of the facts identified by axioms by means of some mystical faculty which defies rational explanation; our awareness of facts is not made possible by hoping or by having “conviction of things not seen.” This would amount to just more stolen concepts. On the contrary, we are aware of those facts by means of sense perception. Those facts implicit in any object we perceive and any act of perceiving. Hence Objectivism (as opposed to subjectivism, which is the basis of the religious view of the world). If the belief that “God exists” is an example of faith, then obviously it is not an axiom on a proper understanding of what an axiom is, for even Christians admit that their god is not accessible to the senses (e.g., it is “invisible,” “transcendent,” “beyond the senses,” etc., just like other things we imagine).

9) Recall, as I pointed out in my blog, that Bahnsen himself quotes Machen approvingly, who indicated explicitly that faith has a logical basis. This conflicts directly with the idea that faith is “similar to an axiom.” Axioms do not rest on some prior logical inference, otherwise they could not be axioms. We do not infer the existence of reality from something other than reality; to what would “other than reality” refer if not to the unreal?

10) GF76 suggests that I “go to other sources,” which Bahnsen would supposedly consult. I have no objection to this suggestion. In fact, I did consult what I thought would be Bahnsen’s primary source, namely the bible (as opposed to something by Calvin, Turretin, Dabney, or other earthly figure). But there are several concerns here. One, I don’t see Bahnsen citing Hebrews 11:1, for instance, when he rules (*Always Ready*, p. 202n.1) that faith is essentially just another word for belief. Two, Hebrews 11:1 does not suggest that faith is just another word for belief. Three, my interaction with Hebrews 11:1 shows that its conception puts stock in what one hopes and yet does not see - i.e., wishing informed by negation - and this simply invites the imagination to take over where reason is turned off. Meanwhile, if Bahnsen does not give his own definition of faith in *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, how is pointing this fact out an instance of misrepresentation?

11) GF76 says that “a reformed presuppositionalist is not going to differ from what the Reformed theologians have said about saving faith (or they would be branded as heretics), though their philosophical leanings may vary.” One might want to make such a sweeping generalization, but conflicts of a damning nature are often unintended consequences of trying to make a point, especially when one’s ambition is to protect a fiction. Also, if I were to take what GF76 says here for granted, then I suppose my detractors might accuse me of putting words into Bahnsen’s

mouth. I find it best to let him speak for himself. Besides, as GF76 admits (“their philosophical leanings may vary”), I do not assume that thinkers who don a common label are monolithic in their views. Indeed, there are many debates and disputes within the Reformed camp alone. Moreover, I find it dubious to suppose that disagreement with a theologian constitutes “heresy,” as if theologians were deemed infallible by virtue of their title. But if that’s the case, so much the better for my critique of religion.

12) GF76 says “maybe a systematic would give you a clearer indication of what faith is,” which I take as agreement that Bahnsen is not clear after all. But again, the purpose in my blog was to examine statements made by Bahnsen.

13) I quoted Bahnsen (*Always Ready*, p. 202n.1) equating faith with belief. Does this agree with other Reformed sources? Or, is this heretical? Even Hebrews 11:1 does not say that faith is belief. Just how many definitions of faith are there?

14) Finally, GF76 has not interacted with the substance of my post, which draws out the conclusion - from Bahnsen’s own words - that faith (on his view) must refer to belief without understanding. Nothing GF76 has stated in his comments at all challenges this analysis.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 03, 2007 8:10 PM](#)

[moded](#) said...

I believe groundfighter76 is simply trying to point out that going to a book that purposes to instruct Christians in Apologetics for the definition of faith is somewhat akin to going to the Dictionary for information about the war of 1812. Sure, you might get lucky and find what you were looking for, but it isn’t the best place to start looking.

As for the rest, I stopped reading when you wrote, ‘So, faith is belief, and this belief must come before “a proper understanding” since it is “the precondition” thereof. This could only mean that, as a belief, faith must be accepted before one understands what it is he is accepting as truth.’ That faith is the precondition for proper understanding is all well and good, but you start add a notion of chronology that was not in the definition. It is certainly not the only meaning one can infer.

The presuppositionalist claim is that everyone has faith (or believe) in God, and that this faith is the precondition for all human experience. The faith described here is the precondition to even logically and rationally analyzing propositions about the truth or falsity of the Christian belief system, or the Objectivist belief system. Unlike belief systems that discourage rational inquiry into the system and demand blind belief, Christianity is a system wherein we are told to test what is taught to see that it is true. One really cannot conclude that “the believer is in no position to tell the difference between truth and falsehood,”

I wouldn’t claim that faith is axiomatic or a starting point for the presuppositionalist, but your point 8 above amused me, seeing as you seemed to be saying that the axiom proposed by groundfighter76 was “faith in faith,” and not simply “faith”. Nothing I saw in groundfighter76’s post seemed to warrant such a response.

[January 04, 2007 12:39 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

Moded wrote: “I believe groundfighter76 is simply trying to point out that going to a book that purposes to instruct Christians in Apologetics for the definition of faith is somewhat akin to going to the Dictionary for information about the war of 1812. Sure, you might get lucky and find what you were looking for, but it isn’t the best place to start looking.”

Let me get this straight. Apologetics is the *defense of the faith*, right? So, we should not expect a book which is intended to instruct readers in defending the faith to present a definition of ‘faith’? That’s like expecting a dictionary to give information about the War of 1812? This is very interesting. This statement of Moded’s gives us a good glimpse into the mindset of the presuppositionalist. Suppose I write a book that is intended to instruct its readers on how to defend reason, and yet I tell my readers not to expect to find a definition of ‘reason’ anywhere in its pages. I could write in the preface “Sure, you might get lucky and find what you were looking for, but my book isn’t the best place to start looking.”

Moded: "As for the rest, I stopped reading when you wrote, 'So, faith is belief, and this belief must come before 'a proper understanding' since it is 'the precondition' thereof. This could only mean that, as a belief, faith must be accepted before one understands what it is he is accepting as truth.' That faith is the precondition for proper understanding is all well and good, but you start add a notion of chronology that was not in the definition."

Actually Bahnsen himself incorporates the notion of **priority** into his understanding of 'faith' when he writes: "Faith is the precondition of a proper understanding... faith precedes knowledgeable understanding." (*Always Ready*, p. 88) This is all Bahnsen's doing; he makes the priority of faith an integral part of his conception of faith. I simply drew out the dismal implications of these and other statements that he supplies in his book by integrating them all into a sum, which is what one should be able to do with his knowledge. Perhaps along with hoping his readers did not expect to find a clear definition of 'faith' in his book, Bahnsen did not expect any of his readers to see how well his various position statements integrate.

Moded: "It is certainly not the only meaning one can infer."

Going by Bahnsen's equation of faith with belief on p. 202n.1 and his statements on p. 88, what do you infer?

Moded: "The presuppositionalist claim is that everyone has faith (or believe) in God, and that this faith is the precondition for all human experience."

Yes, I've heard such claims for a long time now. What I am looking for is a proof to substantiate it. I continually get the impression that presuppositionalists are miffed when people look at such claims critically, which only confirms my suspicion that they expect people to accept such claims on their say so. For they seem capable of only offering a * [poof](#), never a *proof*. A poof is not a proof.

Moded: "The faith described here is the precondition to even logically and rationally analyzing propositions about the truth or falsity of the Christian belief system, or the Objectivist belief system."

Again, that's the claim, but it does not - and cannot - pan out, as I have explained in numerous postings on my blog. The claim "God exists" (and its variants) is not irreducible, nor is it perceptually self-evidently true. Where, for instance, did the believer get the concept 'existence'? Blank out. To what does the word "God" refer? They say it refers to the deity described in the bible. My bible is 1140 pages long. The human mind does not and could not "presuppose" 1140 pages of stories, allegories, poetry, genealogies, parables, epistles, prophecies, legal rulings, historical chronicles, etc., simply to "make sense" of our experiences or "logically and rationally analyzing propositions" about anything. In fact, we need at least some knowledge (including the knowledge of written language) to come to the bible and start ingesting its contents. Meanwhile, the bible presents a worldview which reverses the objective orientation between subject and object, [likening the universe to a cartoon](#). I certainly do not "presuppose" such a distorted and crippled conception of the world in order to "make sense" of my experience or logically and rationally analyze propositions. Perhaps you do, but I surely do not. As [I have pointed out already](#), Christians must assume the truth of my worldview's foundations before they could even consider repeating the claim "God exists."

Moded: "Unlike belief systems that discourage rational inquiry into the system and demand blind belief, Christianity is a system wherein we are told to test what is taught to see that it is true."

I'm reminded of 1 John 4:1: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God."

So, how do you test the claim that Abraham was instructed to deliver his son up as a sacrifice (cf. Gen. 22)? You can't cite the source of the claim itself as proof of the claim, because a claim is not its own proof. Believers read, and believe what they read without having anyway of knowing what really happened thousands of years ago. All the attempts to defend the "inerrancy of Scripture" are intended to justify this kind of blind faith. Those attempts do nothing to prove its stories.

Moded: "One really cannot conclude that 'the believer is in no position to tell the difference between truth and falsehood',"

If one holds that "faith precedes knowledgeable understanding," as Bahnsen claims, yes, one could easily conclude this, especially given his other statements. You offer no alternative interpretation, let alone argue for one. You simply want to negate the one I have presented. That does not bode well for your position.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 04, 2007 5:49 AM](#)

[groundfighter76](#) said...

A few more reasons not to take Dawson seriously:

You said, "1)GF76 writes "unfortunately for you, but I not only own but have read those books you referenced and cited." How this is unfortunate for me is not clear. In fact, I see this as a benefit for both myself and for my readers. If I have misquoted a source, for instance, those who have access to that source are able to correct me. *But GF76 does not show where I have misquoted anything.* On the contrary, what he states simply corroborates what I have presented in my blog, as I will make clear in the following."

Same old, same old. I never said you *misquoted* anything. I said you *misinterpreted* what people were saying (just like you are doing now). These are two different concepts, Dawson.

You said, "2)GF76 calls it "sloppiness" when I point out that Frame does not include a definition of 'reason' in his glossary. But how is this an example of "sloppiness"? Either Frame includes a definition of 'reason' in his glossary, or he doesn't. I can see his charge of "sloppiness" sticking if in fact Frame actually did include a definition of 'reason' in his glossary, but he didn't. That Frame defines the term in one of his books does not overturn the fact that he doesn't in his glossary. I consulted Frame's Glossary because, well, it's a glossary!"

No Dawson, it's sloppy for you to jump to conclusions after checking *one* source! This is akin to me reading a particular source by Ayn Rand or some other hack, noting that her reasons for rejecting the existence of God is never mentioned in this particular source, and concluding that "well I guess" we'll never know Ayn's reason for rejecting the existence of God.

The rest of your post is more of the same.

For instance in #4 you state "Did I misrepresent Frame's glossary? No, I did not. Would it be inappropriate to include an entry for 'reason' in his glossary?"

I never said you misrepresented Frame's glossary. I said that this was an *instance of sloppiness* on your part by not checking other sources (ie, the references for the glossary). You misrepresented Frame himself by concluding that he does not provide a definition of reason (even if he didn't so what).

Anyhow, this isn't worth any more of my time.

[January 04, 2007 7:23 AM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

GF76: "Same old, same old. I never said you *misquoted* anything."

Note that in my comment I stated "for instance..." This should indicate that what I am presenting is merely an example. I was pointing out, *as an example*, that those of my blog's visitors who have the same sources from which I quote could confirm or correct my quotations. Deliberately misquoting a source would be an example of misrepresentation, one not intended to be exhaustive. Hence the "for instance."

GF76: "I said you *misinterpreted* what people were saying (just like you are doing now). These are two different concepts, Dawson."

Yes, you did say this, you also said I misrepresented. I have responded to these charges.

GF76: "No Dawson, it's sloppy for you to jump to conclusions after checking *one* source! This is akin to me reading a particular source by Ayn Rand or some other hack, noting that her reasons for rejecting the existence of God is never mentioned in this particular source, and concluding that "well I guess" we'll never know Ayn's reason for rejecting the existence of God."

I understand your concern, but we should not overlook a few facts before reading too much into my passing comment. For one thing, I nowhere deny that Frame offers a definition of any of the terms in question ('faith', 'reason') in any of his books. Of course, a wild goose chase is not very helpful if one does want to know Frame's definitions. Also, I did not check only *one* source. Another thing, my interest was in finding how presuppositionalists define 'faith', since that was the topic of my blog. While noticing that the glossary does at least mention faith and contrasts it with reason (in its definition of 'fideism'), I checked to see if it offered a definition of 'reason' as well, and pointed out that it was not given in that source. I also noted that the bible (a second source after Frame's glossary) does not seem to give a definition of this term. So far nothing I have stated has been shown to be false. Your chief concern with my blog seems to be that I have given up too quickly in searching for Frame's conception of reason, when in fact the focus of my blog was Bahnsen's conception of faith. (!) But let me stress this: one of the sources that I did check (and commented on in passing) is intended explicitly to be a *glossary*. A glossary is where a thinker has the opportunity to state the definitions of his key terms.

I do not think that my passing comment is at all analogous to "reading a particular source by Ayn Rand..., noting that her reasons for rejecting the existence of God is [sic] never mentioned in this particular source, and concluding that 'well I guess' we'll never know Ayn's reason for rejecting the existence of God." For one thing, Rand was not an atheologist; the notion of a god was quite far from her area of concern as she was a philosopher as well as a novelist. Also, I do not think anyone is obliged to explain why he or she rejects arbitrary notions. For example, no book by Rand that I know of indicates why she did not embrace Geusha. If, however, she put out a lexicon or glossary, and did not include in it a definition of 'reason', I'd wonder why. Rand was a staunch defender of reason. Thus a glossary by Rand which did not include an entry for 'reason' would, in my opinion, be incomplete at best. For the same reasons, I would consider a glossary by a self-proclaimed "defender of the faith" which lacked an entry supplying a definition of 'faith' to be incomplete. This leaves the meaning of a controversial term of central importance to Christianity completely up to readers. It's the "well, you know what I mean by faith" approach. But then, when critics of Christianity point out that what they understand by 'faith' conflicts with what they mean by 'reason', apologists get flustered by this and hasten to say there is no conflict between faith and reason, all the while not ever really making the meanings of their terms very clear. Christians seem to have a different conception of 'faith' with every mood swing.

GF76: "I never said you misrepresented Frame's glossary. I said that this was an *instance of sloppiness* on your part by not checking other sources (ie, the references for the glossary). You misrepresented Frame himself by concluding that he does not provide a definition of reason (even if he didn't so what)."

How many sources do one need to check in order to be free of this "sloppiness" you charge me of? The man put together a glossary, which in fact I very much appreciate. But it lacks entries for both faith and reason. You want to say "so what?" which is your prerogative. It may not be important to you. But I did not state as a conclusion that Frame "does not provide a definition of reason" in any of his writings. Again, you seem eager to read too much into a passing comment.

GF76: "Anyhow, this isn't worth any more of my time."

I'm not sure what you hoped to gain by charging me with misrepresentation, especially when so far none of the specific instances you cite turn out to support your accusation. Indeed, it seems rather petty to go after me for a passing comment in a blog which draws out some pretty damning implications about the presuppositionalist conception of faith given Bahnsen's own statements. Christians have no choice, it seems to me, but to defend faith at any rate, as their bibles make faith a centerpiece of their worldview. (That's why I hold those who undertake "the defense of the faith" to devote at least some attention to clarifying what is meant by the term.) Statements that Christians make about faith very often conflict, and even when they don't, it's usually because they're so vague that they could mean almost anything. If faith has a relationship to knowledge, then two areas need enlightenment:

- 1) What is faith?
- 2) What is its relationship to knowledge?

These issues do not seem important to my critics. Instead, they seem more concerned about protecting their favorite apologists' reputations. That tells us a lot, perhaps all we need to know.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 04, 2007 3:52 PM](#)

[moded](#) said...

"Let me get this straight. Apologetics is the defense of the faith, right?" Correct. It is the *defense* of the faith, not the *definition* of the faith. Readers of Apologetics books are generally expected to already know about their faith. They are looking for ways to defend it, not to define it. after all! Again, you might get lucky and find a book that does go a fair way into defining Christian faith, but faith is a subject worthy of books in itself (and indeed has many books dedicated to explaining just what it is).

Its interesting in your counter that you imply you would hold the dictionary author at fault because you couldn't find information about the war of 1812. Why not simply accept that groundfighter76 has given you a better place to start looking for information regarding faith, and use that information to make your blog even better? Why complain that the places you want to look should be the right place to look, even if they are not? Why disregard his advice out of hand?

As for the claims of the presuppositionalist, I only brought them up to help elucidate Bahnsen's claims about faith, to help put them in context. It seemed your definition was ignoring the context of peresuppositionalist claims. I pointed out that Bahnsen's definition of faith does not chronologically precede reason, as though the Christian is first asked to suspend any sort of logic or standards of reason and believe in God, and only then allow reason to creep in. The Bible won't allow for such a view! You responded by saying Bahnsen "incorporates the notion of priority into his understanding of 'faith'." Again, that's fine and good, but says nothing to support your claims as to the chronology of faith and reason. If faith on the presuppositionalist claim preceeds reason in any sort of chronological way, faith does not proceed it just before an adult accepts the irrational claims of Christians, it does so before a child utters their first propositions. This simply points out that faith must logically precede reason in terms of human understanding. In terms of ontology, reason precedes faith insofar as God is the source of all rationality.

"What I am looking for is a proof to substantiate it. ... For they seem capable of only offering a *poof, never a proof." If that is the case, that is very unfortunate indeed. However, I am less concerned with defending presuppositionalist claims at this point. I'd be fine if you want to declare each and every one of them false for sake of argument. I merely wish that their claims were represented in a way that they would feel was satisfactory.

I am concerned that perhaps you are finding these claims go poof simply because the presuppositionalists you were arguing with were made of straw. I find it hard to buy the claim that these only offer a poof when it seems that just about many a blog entry I have read has resulted in comments claiming that you have not represented the presuppositionalists' claims accurately. And yet, how can you represent their claims accurately when even honest attempts to correct less than ideal references for an essay on faith is met with scorn?

[January 04, 2007 11:56 PM](#)

[Bahnsen Burner](#) said...

I asked: "Let me get this straight. Apologetics is the defense of the faith, right?"

Moded responds: "Correct. It is the defense of the faith, not the definition of the faith."

I see. So, these books defend something that we should not expect them to define. Not even a little. That's what I thought you were saying. Got it.

Moded: "Readers of Apologetics books are generally expected to already know about their faith."

As I mentioned in my response to GF76 above: It's the "well, you know what I mean by faith" approach. I couldn't think of anything more intellectually irresponsible.

Moded: "They are looking for ways to defend it, not to define it. after all!"

That's part of the problem. They want to defend it without really even knowing what it is they are defending. This corroborates my analysis of Bahnsen's conception of faith: Belief without understanding.

Moded: "Again, you might get lucky and find a book that does go a fair way into defining Christian faith, but faith is a subject worthy of books in itself (and indeed has many books dedicated to explaining just what it is)."

So, "faith is a subject worthy of books in itself," but not worth offering just a straightforward definition in a primer

intended for instruction in “the defense of the faith.” Got it.

Moded: “Its interesting in your counter that you imply you would hold the dictionary author at fault because you couldn't find information about the war of 1812.”

If this is what you think I implied, you misinterpreted my statement. I repeated your statement to about dictionaries and their inappropriateness as a source of information on the War of 1812 in the form of a question in order to emphasize the irony of your suggestion, for I do not accept that consulting a source intended to instruct readers on how to “defend the faith” for a definition of ‘faith’ is analogous to expecting a dictionary to give me a blow-by-blow of the War of 1812. This is absurd.

Moded: “Why not simply accept that groundfighter76 has given you a better place to start looking for information regarding faith, and use that information to make your blog even better?”

As I mentioned to GF76 (see my point 10 above), I have no objection to consulting the sources he mentioned. But my purpose was to review Bahnsen's own conception of faith, since I'm examining his “defense of the faith.” Bahnsen put out a 764-page book (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*), including an index which has an entry “faith, definition,” but which does not offer a definition of ‘faith’ (the very thing the heavy volume is intended to defend, mind you) when you get to the page listed in the index.

Moded: “Why complain that the places you want to look should be the right place to look, even if they are not?”

“Complain”? If anything, I'm enjoying this. I find it highly entertaining when Christians rush to defend such omissions as if they were to be expected. You're helping to make my case for me.

Moded: “Why disregard his advice out of hand?”

I have not dismissed GF76's advice, and have nowhere implied that I refuse to consult other sources. I simply note that his advice does not overcome what I consider a major oversight on Bahnsen's part. But now I'm learning that believers themselves actually consider such oversights to be deliberate. This confirms the appropriateness of the first subtitle of my blog: “A Deliberate Ambiguity.” Now I know I'm not imagining when apologetics books seem to come with an unstated tagline “don't expect to be enlightened while reading this publication.”

Moded: “As for the claims of the presuppositionalist, I only brought them up to help elucidate Bahnsen's claims about faith, to help put them in context.”

And you felt the need to do this... because Bahnsen's own effort to do this was insufficient?

Moded: “It seemed your definition was ignoring the context of peresuppositionalist claims.”

Specifically, my definition of what “was ignoring the context of peresuppositionalist [sic] claims”?

Moded: “I pointed out that Bahnsen's definition of faith does not chronologically precede reason, as though the Christian is first asked to suspend any sort of logic or standards of reason and believe in God, and only then allow reason to creep in.”

Which definition would that be? I don't know that I even found “Bahnsen's definition of faith” in any of his books. Do you mean his equation of faith with belief on p. 202n.1 of *Always Ready*? As for the *role* which he ascribes to faith, Bahnsen does not make it clear that faith is supposed to “chronologically precede reason.” What he does say (p. 88) is “faith precedes knowledgeable understanding.” But putting this together with the issue you're speaking of, it seems that he would be saying that faith precedes reason if reason involves “knowledgeable understanding.” Perhaps it is your view that reason does not involve “knowledgeable understanding.” What a mess. I'm glad these aren't my problems.

Moded: “The Bible won't allow for such a view!”

I would like to see your defense of this claim. From my reading, the bible is so uninformative and imprecise on these matters that it could allow for a whole host of views. And that is what characterizes Christianity today: thousands of denominations, sects and subcults all claiming the divine authority of the bible. But look at the unending streams of internal disputes and internecine conflict that has splintered Christianity from its inception. It strains the mind even

to contemplate it. But here you come along and say that the bible will not allow for one out of any number of spins. Okay.

Moded: "You responded by saying Bahnsen 'incorporates the notion of priority into his understanding of 'faith'.' Again, that's fine and good, but says nothing to support your claims as to the chronology of faith and reason."

What specifically did I claim "as to the chronology of faith and reason"? I'm simply trying to see how well Bahnsen's claims (including his claim that "faith precedes knowledgeable understanding") integrate. I nowhere stated that he means "chronologically precedes." If anything, this suggests that he thinks his faith *logically* precedes (i.e., is "the precondition of a proper understanding") the "knowledgeable understanding" he thinks he has. His "understanding" is so "knowledgeable" that he does not even need to supply a definition of faith in a book intended to instruct believers on how to defend something he doesn't bother defining. Amazing!

Moded: "If faith on the presuppositionalist claim precedes reason in any sort of chronological way, faith does not proceed it just before an adult accepts the irrational claims of Christians, it does so before a child utters their first propositions."

Since I do not recall Bahnsen making any statement about when faith is accepted in regard to the development of a child's linguistic abilities, I can only take your suggestion here with a grain of salt insofar as it is intended to describe Bahnsen's position.

Moded: "This simply points out that faith must logically precede reason in terms of human understanding."

And as I stated just above, that is what I thought Bahnsen was suggesting, that "faith must logically precede reason in terms of human understanding." This only underscores my analysis: faith is belief without understanding (since the "understanding" must come logically [as opposed to "chronologically"] after faith). You have just confirmed my interpretation.

Moded: "In terms of ontology, reason precedes faith insofar as God is the source of all rationality."

Which just makes me wonder (again!) what Christians could possibly mean by 'rationality'. I do not find this word in any of my bibles, so it seems to have been inserted into the discussion by apologists at some point, and from what I can tell, without a very good understanding of what rationality is. Human beings need rationality to guide them in *discovering* knowledge of the world (which presupposes non-omniscience and non-infallibility) and in determining the proper actions they must take in order to live (which presupposes a fundamental alternative that biological organisms have and indestructible, immortal and eternal invisible magic beings do not have). I could not think of anything more opposite to rationality than the imaginary being Christians call "God."

I wrote: "What I am looking for is a proof to substantiate it. ... For they seem capable of only offering a *poof, never a proof."

Moded: "If that is the case, that is very unfortunate indeed."

I agree - it is most unfortunate for them. But this is the conclusion I drew after reviewing Bahnsen's opening statement - the statement for which he would be most prepared to present - in his often-celebrated debate with Gordon Stein. I found no proof in Bahnsen's opening statement. But, I did find a *poof*.

Moded: "However, I am less concerned with defending presuppositionalist claims at this point."

Wise move.

Moded: "I'd be fine if you want to declare each and every one of them false for sake of argument. I merely wish that their claims were represented in a way that they would feel was satisfactory."

Well, I'm not in the business of appeasing the religionists' feelings, if that is what you mean. I examine what I read in the presuppositionalist literature and post my reactions on my blog. So far, I still see no substantive challenge to what I've presented in my analysis of Bahnsen's statements about faith that I culled from his own books.

Moded: "I am concerned that perhaps you are finding these claims go poof simply because the presuppositionalists you were arguing with were made of straw. I find it hard to buy the claim that these only offer a poof when it seems

that just about many a blog entry I have read has resulted in comments claiming that you have not represented the presuppositionalists' claims accurately. And yet, how can you represent their claims accurately when even honest attempts to correct less than ideal references for an essay on faith is met with scorn?"

Apologists seem to go by a common playbook: when critics publish their criticisms of presuppositionalist arguments and statements, reach for the misrepresentation card, and do so quick! I've interacted with my detractors' accusations. Most are amazingly petty-minded (see for example, GF76's complaints above; others can be produced). If they think I am misunderstanding something, they are invited to come here and correct the record. I'll review what they will say. Meanwhile, I wonder if I'm not being misrepresented when my detractors try to launch their accusations. Apologists seem more concerned that non-believers do not misrepresent their champions (who do not even offer a definition of what it is they're out to defend!) than they are about getting their critics' criticisms right. As for my piece on Bahnsen's opening statement, it is available on my blog. Feel free to read it or disregard it. But I challenge you to find where I have misrepresented Bahnsen.

Regards,
Dawson

[January 05, 2007 5:46 AM](#)