“LOGIC AND CHRISTIANITY”

A Book Review

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by

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*I affirm the honor code.

“LOGIC AND CHRISTIANITY”

Prominent New Testament scholar and systematician Vern Poythress develops an extensive excursus on the study of logic from a Christian perspective in his work, “Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought.” What is logic? How can we rightly distinguish the roles reason and emotion play in culture? How can we argue biblically? Poythress lays the framework for the reality of logic in language as well as its dependence upon God. His work centers on the claim that logic is foundational to human reasoning, argumentation, university studies, and a range of human functions not always perceived as employing logic, such as basic communication. One of the greatest attributes of the book was the attention to argumentation analysis. It is not simply the case that logic aids argumentation, but that logic is presupposed in any given argument. Anyone who makes a claim and tries to support it with reason relies on principles of logic. Overall, he provides a helpful introduction to the study of logic from a Christian worldview. In the remainder of this review, I will examine five key points in the book and offer criticisms.

The first point pertains to the origin of logic and human authority. Poythress argues that logic itself should be grounded in the authority of Christ, not human autonomy. Where does logic come from? Ultimately, it comes from the nature of God. From the negative aspect, he argues that any attempt to reason autonomously is a hopeless task due to sin. Worse, because of sin, we desire autonomy: “our sinfulness infects our reasoning, so that we come to the evidence with corrupted standards for judging it. Even if the Bible is genuine, we want to judge it rather than submit to God. We want to remain in charge of our life (autonomy), including the life of

reasoning. Our desire for autonomy, and the conception of reasoning that goes with it, need changing. We need to be redeemed by God from our rebellion."[1]

It is not all that difficult to see the problem with this first theme, as Poythress himself identifies it. The view of logic he promotes aligns with mainstream presuppositionalism. In essence, due to the noetic effects of the fall, humans cannot reason properly. Because of this reality, we must presuppose the Christian worldview in order to use logic properly. This view is outwardly circular. For reasoning about God to properly take place, God and particular beliefs about God must be assumed. Poythress admits the circularity here. I think that presuppositionalists like Poythress do not truly distinguish between the source and the application of logic. We can agree that the source of logic is God (ontology), but it does not necessarily follow that God must be presupposed for logic to be meaningfully engaged (epistemology). The ontological and epistemological aspects pertaining to logic itself are conflated. There must be additional premises. Poythress would have to demonstrate that sin, for example, disables our ability to use logic properly, which is far too weighty a task. Why do I say that? Because if we consider logic as general principles, they function the same between a believer and a non-believer. The law of noncontradiction, for instance, depends on God for its existence, but the unbeliever can abide by the law regardless. Poythress comes close to addressing this when he says, "there are two ways of studying logic, the Christian way and the non-Christian way."[2] Surely we can talk about the existence of logic from a Christian standpoint, but fallacies are fallacies. There is no difference between a valid argument from a Christian perspective and a valid argument from a non-Christian's perspective. They may differ on how exactly logical validity originates or subsists, but the principles themselves are consistent. I think

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[1] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 36–37.

[2] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 41.

presuppositionalists "jump the gun," so to speak, by failing to separate logic itself from the general principles we live out through human reasoning.

Engaging with logic as a human being is different than the origin of logic itself. Poythress must show that we cannot "do" logic or "use" logic as a result of sin, unless we ascribe to Christian assumptions. From my evaluation, he has not done so. Rather, he merely asserts that "The dispositions of our hearts, whether toward sin or toward righteousness, affect our evaluations."[3] Besides the fact that he has not shown why we must presuppose Christianity, how do we know that presuppositions about God literally aid our rationality at all? To me, there seems to be a leap from "God is the source of logic" to "belief in God is required." Even if we grant that sin infects our rational evaluations, that does not mean that suddenly adopting the right presuppositions eliminates those sinful effects. I contend that this first theme, human autonomy and the noetic effects of sin, is primarily a theoretical discussion of the justification for logical principles, and less applicable to the exercise of logical reasoning.

The second point I seek to evaluate is the relationship that exists between inductive reasoning and God's existence. How do we make sense of the logical structure of the universe? Why can human inference have any truth value? As Poythress argues, these questions are best explained by God's existence. We can make observations and draw conclusions from them because we can discern a truth-bearing correspondence between propositions and the physical world. The physical world has order and structure because God made it that way. If God did not exist, we would be left with nothing but a physical world of mere happenstance. How could our sensory experience—which is required to make reasonable observations and inferences—be trustworthy? Is it not just as likely, or perhaps more likely, that the randomness of the universe would produce unreliable sensory experience? If no supreme logician designed the universe, why presume randomness would be compatible with inductive reasoning? The perfect designer of the universe shows us that we can trust our sensory experience and ability to make inferences. Put in

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[3] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 39.

Poythress's terms, "Inductive arguments work because God made the world with regularities that harmonize with our sense of what to expect."[4] But as he rightly notes, since God designed the universe according to his own will, not some external standard, it should not be surprising that there are exceptions to regularities and inductive reasoning—it does not always follow.

I have little to critique, as this section was relatively short and on point. However, I want to reemphasize that Poythress jumps from "particular" to "general" in making this argument. He first shows what induction is and how we can make cogent inferences (particular), but as he builds a theological point, he speaks of logic in a general terms. To play devil's advocate: suppose I observe ten white swans and infer that all swans are white. Even if this is a weak argument, why think that God's existence makes this inference more intelligible? That is, we can infer logically from a mathematical relationship between two propositions: (1) these ten swans are white; and (2) there are many more than ten swans in the world. Basic probability tells us our sample size is not strong enough to conclude that all swans are white unless we add another proposition, such as that no one has ever seen a non-white swan. Here we are not speaking about order and design, but basic mathematics. Then the question becomes, why does mathematics apply to the physical world? Poythress's argument is a good one, but it is not unobjectionable.

Poythress makes a third point that I think implicitly contradicts his first: the independence of logic. He writes, "Logic seems not only to be independent of the particular facts of the world, but independent of the people who use logic in their arguments. Logical validity holds in any language of the world, in any culture of the world, for any person in the world… Logical validity of this kind is truly universal. That is one implication of its being impossible to imagine otherwise."[5] His claim here is a substantial one. There is, in one sense, a dependence on

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[4] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 53.

[5] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 57–58.

the nature of God for logic to exist; but there is another sense in which logic stands firm without influence of external causes.

How can the independence of logic be consistent with his extensive thoughts on presuppositionalism? In fact, I see this as supporting my criticism. There are general principles of logic that are rooted in reality regardless of the presuppositions or even the noetic effects of the fall. What does sin have to do with the apprehension of logical validity? That seems to me more relevant to natural finitude than to sin. Unbelievers can rightly apprehend logical foundations, such as validity, without Christian presuppositions. Poythress admits this, but I fail to see how this makes sense on presuppositionalism.

The fourth point involves his discussion of the Trinity. He offers a compelling argument for the personal nature of logic—that logic is always meant to be grasped and communicated via language. But only persons perform language. In his tri-personhood, God is the personal source of logic. Especially for those Christians influenced by Greek logos doctrine, Christ incarnate is the eternal logos—or reason or word—who sustains all forms of logic. Logic is personal, and ultimately boils down to the person of Christ. What I do not quite grasp is how he arrives at evidence for the Trinity from the existence of logic. I see the Logos as maintaining the doctrine, but where does the Holy Spirit come into play in terms of the origin of logic? Why would he have an essential role in this sense? Poythress comes closest to answering this by saying that "The mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity guarantees coherence among the persons."[6] First, we need clarification on what he means by mutual indwelling. Second, is he arguing that the Spirit is necessary to make sense of the personal relationship between the Father and the Son to establish logic? This point seems impertinent to me.

The fifth point related to this evaluation is the argument that logic presents somewhat of an analogy between the human mind and God's mind. God is the source or mind of logic, but we bear his image. In a sense, when we participate in logic, we somehow participate in God.

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[6] Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 71.

This point is well taken, but again, I challenge its consistency with his other views. If there is an analogy, then, as Poythress appears to admit, even unbelievers participate in God's nature to some extent. But if they are in a rebellious state and suppress the truth, then how can they use logic at all, theoretically speaking? I am confident in his concession that unbelievers do use logic. However, if unbelievers use logic, and if every time they use logic they somehow share in the mind of God, then why believe that Christian presuppositions are necessary? I see the issue as presuppositionalists wanting to affirm two sides of the same coin that are mutually exclusive. On the one hand, they say that logic must be conducted in a certain way—the Christian way—but then they admit that unbelievers can use logic meaningfully. Unbelievers are not exhaustively depraved insofar as their sin separates them from logical argumentation; otherwise, they could not possibly participate in the mind of God as they reason. I conclude that we need a more nuanced understanding of the distinction between believers and unbelievers regarding their logical processes.

Conclusion

Poythress contributes countless insights. He aims to be biblically faithful in his dealings with philosophy, and I believe he has done so. In my view, his issues stem from a lack of coherence due to his commitment to presuppositionalism. I contend that we need not venture to the extremes of presuppositionalism. Instead, we should articulate the plausibility of logic's foundations on a Christian worldview, in contrast to the implausibility of logic under a non-Christian worldview, without making the radical theoretical move of necessitating a heart-orientation toward Christ to “do” logic. It is quite true that our logical evaluations will improve as we align more with Christian beliefs—that is, the truth. This differs from Poythress in that he would require Christian presuppositions for logic to be done properly. He reminds us that logic, understood as a set of laws, is both dependent on and independent of the justification for its existence.

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