

## **COMMUNICATING THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE IN A POSTMODERN ENVIRONMENT**

### ***EMPHASIZING AN EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE***

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This paper is one of the winners of the “Hall of Fame” award given by Professor John Frame at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL. Third Millennium is proud to add this paper to our online archive and give it special mention as a work worthy of emulation.

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#### **I. The Dilemma: A Battle of Evangelical vs. Postmodern Reluctance**

The majority of evangelical Christians (appropriately in the view of the author) hinge their entire evangelical message on the authority of a “Great Book,” the holy, inspired Word of God. All religious truths regarding the nature of man and God, the nature and effects of sin, and the path to redemption flow from the contents of this one Book. Without the Book and its authoritative position, it becomes very difficult to maintain and communicate a cohesive, grounded, inerrant and changeless religious message. However, the very notion of truth and authority being contained within a single text (or collection of texts) is a difficult concept – even for many devoted Christians. Especially in a postmodern environment, the centrality and authority of Scripture presents an intellectual hurdle in evangelism and Christian development.

- **Postmodern Reluctance to a “Container” of Truth**

Recent generations of evangelicals have seen the world changing all around them. More and more people – especially, it seems, their evangelical “targets” – see the world in far less “fixed” terms than earlier generations. In 2003, the vast majority of people (both inside and outside the Church) see truth and authority in highly subjective, relativistic terms. Objective truth is not *entirely* dead (*i.e.*, nearly everyone agrees that the *really* bad stuff like unjustified murder is objectively, morally wrong), but on matters concerning the nature of man, the earth, God, personal fulfillment, redemption, and the after-life society *en-masse* refrains from holding absolute positions. To some (especially some Christians), the reluctance to the absolute is merely a misguided sense of humility (*i.e.* “I don’t want to force my ideas on others”); for others, it is a true resistance of submission to absolute truth and that truth’s absolute God.

While much has been written in recent years on the emergence of postmodernism, its attributes and qualities, the recent emphasis on subjective and existential “truth” is the most important for the purposes of this paper. Simply put, for something to be “true” in today’s society it must be *true to the subject*, it must be something that the individual has managed to grab a hold of, meditate on, and *experience* in terms of its operative effects in a real and personal way. Without this sort of existential experience, no concept or position, no matter how logical or wonderful is *true*.

- **Evangelical Reluctance to Engage in Existential Dialogue**

The currents of postmodern existentialism undercut many evangelical's ability to communicate the objective authority of their Book. And as we've seen, without the Book's authority, it becomes difficult for the evangelizer to point to any indisputable, concrete basis for his message. Scripture is easily reduced by the postmodern mind to be just one of many "great" writings that are subject to literary and philosophical criticism. And when the Book itself becomes subject to criticism, many Evangelicals become impotent to communicate their faith with any sense of persuasion.

At the same time, most evangelicals who have accepted the objective and absolute authority of Scripture are extremely reluctant to engage in dialogue on the existential value and preeminence of Scripture. For many, the existential perspective seems humanistic and relativistic – the very things that we say our God is not – so we are tempted try to convert the seeker's psyche to first accept Scripture's objective value, perhaps using very sound historical and philosophical reasoning – but if we cannot accomplish this psychological "conversion" we consider giving up altogether.

This "battle of reluctance" was identified well (over 300 years ago!) by Pascal in the *Pensees*:

Thus we are left with a conflict of modes of understanding – Those who are accustomed to judge by feeling do not understand the process of reasoning, for they would understand at first sight and are not used to seek for principles. And others, on the contrary, who are

accustomed to reason from principles, do not at all understand matters of feeling, seeking principles and being unable to see at a glance.<sup>1</sup>

Many of us simply don't like the idea of communicating to the existential aspect of our contacts' personality. However, since evangelism and Christian development is, by nature, a matter of *personal* conversion and growth (at least insofar as it is a personal response to a real and objective God), it is appropriate that we tailor our evangelical attempts to at least emphasize man's existential perspective. This emphasis of the existential perspective must also encompass our approach to communicating the position and authority of Scripture.

- **The Challenge of Absolute Authority and Absolute Assent**

Beyond the obstacles imposed by our current *audience* is the inherent difficulty of coming to trust *any* one source as completely authoritative. For instance, it is not difficult to assent to the absolute truth of simple propositions such as “grass is green” or “summer is warmer than winter” – these matters are generally known and understood and don't require the subject to cast their confidence in any matter of eternal significance. The difference with Scripture however, is that *She*<sup>2</sup> *claims absolute authority on ultimate matters*. She claims to be the “final word” on our biggest questions. Thus, Her demands for commitment are great. A casual commitment will simply not do Her justice.

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<sup>1</sup> Pascal, *Pensees*, Part 1:3 (translated by W. F. Trotter (2000)) available at <http://www.thocp.net/biographies/papers/pensees.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Simply to emphasize a relational and existential perspective, for the remainder of this paper I will often refer to Scripture in feminine personified terms.

This is the difficulty: “Partial” assent or even “strong” assent is not a suitable match for Her claims to absolute authority over every aspect of our lives. Anything less than complete, absolute assent denies at least a small *part* of Her authority and thus denies her “absolute” nature.<sup>3</sup> Yet, absolute assent is a difficult concept (and not just for postmodern relativists). In fact, nothing else in our lives, save perhaps marriage, demands such a level of commitment.

What are we to do then with this Book that claims absolute authority over our lives and our view of God, human nature, the earth, and our redemption? How do we come to trust Her with our very lives? How do we communicate Her superiority and absolute authority to others?

## **II. “Courting Scripture”: Existential experience leading to personal commitment and devotion to Scripture’s authority**

We have to more thoroughly explore ways of communicating the authority of Scripture so that She is permitted to connect with the societal demand for “truth” that is tangible, experiential and “real to me.” This shouldn’t pose a problem to Christianity, though it may pose a problem to sterilized, modernist versions of Christianity. The Ancient Judaism and Christianity of the Bible is characterized by a personal, knowable, yet mysterious God who takes a direct and tangible role in everyday life, sent his Son to earth to walk among *real men*,

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<sup>3</sup> Many have argued for acceptance of “varying levels of certainty” in understanding God’s revelation, including Scripture. This approach has a certain realism to it and actually tracks the gradual development of an existential “relationship” with Scripture urged herein (see below). However, this approach does not remove at least the *apparent* demand that Scripture places on potential converts. When the initial concept of Her absolute authority is broached, a common reaction among potential converts is to question how they could ever come to wholly submit their mind to one text.

dine with *real sinners* and heal *real disease*. God has never been nearly as interested in mechanical understanding of his “truth,” as he is in an engaged heart that strives to know him intimately. Consider Jesus’ admonition to the Pharisees of Jerusalem:

You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people honor me with their lips, *but their hearts are far from me*. They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men.”<sup>4</sup>

If God is primarily interested in us knowing him personally, knowing him experientially, then it makes sense that our approaches to knowing his most specific revelation of himself, namely Scripture, also share this experiential quality. Perhaps, then, our “approach” to the authority of Scripture should focus more on a *process* of “courtship,” the development of a love and trust *relationship* with this great text. Rather than attempting to incorporate Scripture’s objective authority as a precursor to evangelism or early-Christian development, we should consider *encouraging* our spiritual acquaintances in embarking upon their own personal journey of *experiencing* the text and meaning of Scripture, Her impact on their everyday lives, Her comparative majesty to other “great texts,” and Her profound mysteries.

To be clear, such an approach does not in any way deny the *objective* authority of this great Book. Instead it will simply reemphasize an existential perspective in *communicating* Her (objective) authority.<sup>5</sup> Mature, convinced believers are confident of this absolute authority. The challenge is for the

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 15:7-9 (NIV), Jesus quoting Isaiah 29:13.

<sup>5</sup> See Frame, *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, P&R Publishing (1987), pp. 191-94 (and throughout the book) for a detailed explanation of utilizing “perspectivalism” in understanding the various attributes of God and his revelation.

objectively convinced to lead a new, postmodern seeker or new convert to a place of total dependence and devotion to Scripture and to build a passionate desire to know Her intimately. However, to do so, we must rise above conservative-evangelicalism's reluctance to engage in existential communication.

Thus, below I submit the concept of "Courting Scripture" as a process (perhaps life-long) of developing a personal love and subjective confidence in the truth and authority of God's special revelation. "Courtship" implies a certain *experience*, a give-and-take development of a love and trust relationship. The maturing of the relationship will lead to a point of personal confidence and commitment to Her preeminence and authority. And while a specific timeline is not nearly as important as the personal experience and growth, the process envisioned is not necessarily an overnight experience. The courtship will extend months or years (and in many ways, a lifetime) as the convert continues to grow in their love, confidence and devotion to Her message.

### **III. Our Doctrine Requires an Emphasis on Existential Persuasion**

Emphasizing an existential approach to Scripture's authority *should* find general acceptance in evangelical circles. At least for Presbyterians, our Confession clearly states:

The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. The authority does not depend on the testimony of any man or church but completely on God, its author, Who is Himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) § 1¶4.

Thus, we see the normative, objective position (or perspective) on Scripture. She is true and authoritative not *because* of any human experience to that effect, but simply because God, Her author, says so.

However, the Confession recognizes that people generally require a high level of personal persuasion in order to accept Scripture as true and authoritative. Therefore, it offers several reasons for Her superiority and authority:

We may be influenced by the testimony of the church to value the Bible highly and reverently, and Scripture itself shows in so many ways that it is God's word; for example, in its spiritual subject matter, in the effectiveness of its teaching, the majesty of its style, the agreement of all its parts, its unified aim from beginning to end (to give all glory to God), the full revelation it makes of the only way of man's salvation, its many other incomparably outstanding features, and its complete perfection.<sup>7</sup>

Still, an honest person will admit that many of these *good* reasons for trusting the authority and superiority of Scripture cannot be comprehended immediately, but must be internally (existentially) proven to a person over time. In fact, these reasons for Her authority, even if believed, are not necessarily sufficient to convince a reader of Her *absolute* authority – though they should at least convince the reader that they have encountered a “great” religious book.

Thus, the Confession concludes this discussion with the final instruction:

However, we are completely persuaded and assured of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible *only* by the inward working of the Holy Spirit, Who testifies by and with the word in our hearts (emphasis added).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> WCF 1¶5a

<sup>8</sup> WCF 1¶5b

Thus, the pattern exhibited in the Confession is:

- (1) Scripture is inerrant and authoritative solely on account of God's own directive, according to its contents (the normative perspective);
- (2) We are *influenced* in recognizing the authority of Scripture by the many ways that it exhibits itself as being the inspired word of God (the situational perspective prompting us towards existential confirmation);
- (3) Ultimately, we are *completely* persuaded (see my comment on *absolute assent*, above) of Scripture's authority by the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (the culmination of existential confirmation).

While it is common for evangelicals to discuss the first prong as their “reason” for accepting the authority of Scripture – the sort of “God said it, I believe it, that settles it!” mantra one often witnesses in fundamentalist circles (or on late-night Christian television!) – we are less prone to carefully discuss prongs two and three.<sup>9</sup> In fact, possibly since prong three (eventual Holy Spirit persuasion) clearly indicates the need for *existential* Holy Spirit confirmation; we hardly ever speak of such a concept. We find it difficult to understand *exactly* how this kind of personal confirmation occurs and it conjures up feelings of a sort of “mystic relativism.” However, a strong awareness and engagement in the existential perspective is essential to reach a postmodern audience. Clearly, the existential perspective has *always* been part of the faith – such that it is set forth

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<sup>9</sup> I note that prong two receives significant treatment in apologetic works. Clearly, the role these works play in bringing a person to subjective certainty should not be discounted.

in the Confession (circa mid-17th century). Cultural developments now mandate that it be *fully* explored and communicated.<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. Psalm 119

No greater support for an existential experience with Scripture could exist than that which Scripture, Herself, provides in Psalm 119. The 176-verses are essentially a love poem to God's "law" (including the totality of his decrees). Even its structure – its 22 sections are arranged in an acrostic format utilizing all 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet – exhibit pains taken by the Psalmist to instill his love poem with an artistic quality. While an entire treatise could be written on the significance of this Psalm, I will settle for a few (rather arbitrary) selections that illustrate true, existential enrapture with God's written decrees (all quotations are from the NIV, emphasis added):

v. 32 – I run in the path of your commands, for *you have set my heart free*;

v. 40 – How I *long* for your precepts!;

v. 64 – The earth is filled with *your love*, O LORD; teach me your decrees;

v. 97 – Oh, how I *love* your law! I meditate on it all day long;

v. 111 – Your statutes are *my heritage* forever;

they are the *joy* of my heart;

v. 113 – I hate double-minded men, but I *love* your law;

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<sup>10</sup> The Confession clearly directs that it is the work of the *Holy Spirit* that provides existential confirmation of Scripture and her contents. To this, I could not agree more. However, while the Holy Spirit is the One behind the scenes bringing the maturing believer to a point of absolute commitment, His work occurs concurrently with (and even through) a host of life experiences. This paper is directed to how we, on a day-to-day level, encourage seekers in this process.

v. 149 – Hear my voice *in accordance with your love*; preserve my life, O LORD, *according to your laws*;

v. 163 – I hate and abhor falsehood but *I love* your law.

Scripture, Herself, presents many more examples of why cultivating an existential love for Her is an appropriate aspect to learning to recognize Her preeminence and authority. However, at minimum, the verses listed above should eliminate any contention that emphasizing an existential perspective is without Scriptural merit.

## **V. The Christian Existential Perspective in Philosophy**

Through the years, there has been much debate on whether our knowledge of God finds its deepest manifestations through our intellectual assent to objective concepts regarding His nature or through our passions and heart perceptions of His workings. Kierkegaard and Pascal provide two of the most well known arguments for an emphasis on Christian existentialism. Their comments are helpful to this discussion.

Kierkegaard's writings provide at least a partial (though imperfect) framework for the subjective relationship to Scripture urged herein. Most likely as a reaction to the passionless religious adherence to the state-run, Danish Lutheran Church of his day, he wrote significantly on "subjective" realization of truth. Careful never to explicitly deny the existence of objective truth and clearly recognizing the existence of an objectively true God, he did expend great effort in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (using the alias Johannes Climacus) arguing for the priority of "becoming" subjective in one's pursuit of truth

(specifically *religious* truth) over mere intellectual assent to objective (which he even deemed “abstract”) truth. S.K. argues:

[S]ubjective acceptance is precisely the decisive factor; and an objective acceptance of Christianity is paganism or thoughtlessness.

Christianity proposes to endow the individual with an eternal happiness, a good which is not distributed wholesale, but only to one individual at a time. Though Christianity assumes that there inheres in the subjectivity of the individual, as being the potentiality of the appropriation of this good, the possibility for its acceptance, it does not assume that the subjectivity is immediately ready for such acceptance or even that it has, without further ado, a real conception of the significance of such a good. The development or transformation of the individual’s subjectivity, its infinite concentration in itself over against the conception of an eternal happiness, that highest good of the infinite – this constitutes the developed potentiality of the primary potentiality which subjectivity as such presents. In this way Christianity protests every form of objectivity; it desires that the subject should be infinitely concerned about himself.<sup>11</sup>

Kierkegaard rightly further develops this argument to show the supremacy of “one who, driven by the infinite passion of his need of God, feels an infinite concern for his own relationship to God in truth,” as compared with one who merely intellectually assents to the “correct,” but abstract, God.<sup>12</sup> Once started down the “subjective-truth” road, however, Kierkegaard often assumes that any eventual objective certainty of the truth is impossible or at least *undesirable*. It is almost as if S.K. feels such objective certainty would *ruin* the subjective experience, thus his framework seems to assume a certain “disconnect” between his “passionate inwardness” and concrete, objective truth. He argues that objective knowledge must be “placed in abeyance” so that the subjective pursuit may continue uninhibited.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Fragments*, as reproduced in Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, page 207 (Princeton University Press, 1946).

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 212.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 214.

In contrast to Kierkegaard's apparent mutual exclusion of the subjective pursuit of God and intellectual certainty through objective assent, there does seem to be a "passionate inwardness" that can gradually *lead to* objective certainty. Or, phrased differently, it seems appropriate that our "passionate inwardness" can be an effective *response* to the (real) objects that deserve our love. This vantage seems more consistent with Pascal's writings on the heart's response to God.

On the one hand Pascal recognizes that true faith springs out of an existential experience with our Maker:

*The heart has its reasons, which reason does not know. We feel it in a thousand things. I say that the heart naturally loves the Universal Being, and also itself naturally, according as it gives itself to them; and it hardens itself against one or the other at its will. You have rejected the one and kept the other. Is it by reason that you love yourself? It is the heart which experiences God, and not the reason. This, then, is faith: God felt by the heart, not by the reason.*<sup>14</sup>

Adding to this, Pascal goes on to say that while (objectively grounded) *reasons* for belief in God might *prepare* a subject for true faith in the Almighty, it is only when God gives spiritual insight on an existential level that one can truly come to supernatural faith<sup>15</sup>:

Therefore, those to whom God has imparted religion by intuition are very fortunate and justly convinced. But to those who do not have it, we can give it only by reasoning, waiting for God to give them spiritual insight, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Pascal admonishes his reader to not *overemphasize* the importance of intellectual reasoning in coming to real, saving faith. He

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<sup>14</sup> Pascal, *Pensees*, Part IV ¶ 75, *supra* note 1.

<sup>15</sup> I note that this is precisely the formula followed by the Westminster Confession in dealing with the authority of Scripture (see above). First, the Confession states that Scripture is established by God as authoritative. Then it proceeds to give many *reasons* why we can trust its authority. However, it concludes with the instruction that ultimately we are only convinced of Scripture's authority by the inner working of the Holy Spirit in us (Pascal's God-given, "spiritual insight").

<sup>16</sup> Pascal, *Pensees*, Part IV ¶ 85, *supra* note 1.

recognizes that God is personally involved in drawing the *hearts* of His people to Himself. He concludes with Psalm 119:36 as an indication of God, himself, drawing the *heart* of his followers to himself.

Do not wonder to see simple people believe without reasoning. God imparts to them love of Him and hatred of self. He inclines their heart to believe. Men will never believe with a saving and real faith, unless God inclines their heart; and they will believe as soon as He inclines it. And this is what David knew well, when he said: *Inclina cor meum, Deus, in... \* - \* Ps. 119. 36. "Incline my heart, O Lord, unto thy testimonies."* (emphasis added)<sup>17</sup>

Thus, it is not just the rise of postmodernism that has elevated the need to emphasize the existential perspective in coming to faith. Both Kierkegaard and Pascal were dealing with similar issues *over three-hundred years ago*. Recent cultural developments have merely demanded a reemphasis of these concepts. Furthermore, while the comments above are primarily directed towards matters of general faith, they also undoubtedly include within their gambit the issue of Scripture's role in our existential faith experience.

How then do we incorporate development of an existential experience with Scripture into evangelism and Christian development? Clearly, the *existential* nature of this issue requires great flexibility on the part of the teacher/evangelizer. The process must be tailored to each spiritual acquaintance, taking into account their questions, passions and experiences. However, I submit a few thoughts below as a *very* general model a seeker could be led in while developing an existential love and trust relationship with Scripture.

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<sup>17</sup> Pascal, *Penses*, Part IV ¶ 90, *supra* note 1.

## **VI. Courting Scripture: “The First Dance”**

As in any relationship, there will be the point of the first meeting. Perhaps a seeker has just had their first substantial conversation with a Christian about matters of faith and, specifically, the role of Scripture. They may take time to do a little reading, exploring a few of Her passages. At this very early point, they may not understand much of what they read, but if God is drawing them, there will be the interest to go further into the process. Of course, the seeker must be free (and intentionally set at ease by the evangelizer) to have this first meeting their future “bride” without any heavy-handed imposition of duty or obligation.

## **VII. Courting Scripture: “We’re not Exclusive” *Pondering other great works in the development of a longing for Scripture.***

Shortly after the “first dance” with Scripture, it is to be expected that a seeker will take interest in Her, but will desire to explore and compare Scripture to other sources of philosophy and “truth.” A time of weighing and sifting is in order. This could include taking time to explore classical philosophy and literature, non-orthodox “religious” philosophies or any other “great” work of man that struggles to deal with eternal questions. In some settings it may also include more popular forms of philosophy and cultural entertainment. The cultural resistance to Christian “narrow-mindedness” demands, at a minimum, tolerance on the part of evangelicals that allows seekers to explore other great sources of knowledge concurrently with their exploration of Scripture. Beyond that, however, we should consider whether our mere “tolerance” should be elevated to

actual *encouragement* of seekers to explore and experience other great works while experiencing their first encounters with Scripture and Her God.

*Clearly, some discretion is needed at this point.* For instance, there may not be much utility in *encouraging* a seeker of Christ to read the Koran (or worse, the Satanic bible) just so they can “test” and compare their budding faith in the contents of Scripture. On the contrary, the entire process of “Courting Scripture” presupposes that there is a genuine desire within the seeker to seek the true God and His true revelation. In this sense, at least a preliminary *submission* to God is presumed for that is the only way that this journey will lead to true spiritual commitment, and avoid a useless exercise in rebellious human reasoning. However, depending upon the convert’s own intellectual/religious history and passions they will have a healthy, natural interest in how other great thinkers have attempted to resolve the eternal problems addressed by Scripture.

*Encouraging them in their exploration of other “great works” has the potential to build a more dynamic spiritual awareness that will in turn lead to a more dynamic application of Scripture once the reader reaches a point of actual commitment to Her authority.* More importantly, it also recognizes that a true commitment to any beloved requires some confidence on the part of the lover that the one he has chosen is *superior to all others*. Therefore, a period of non-exclusive courtship will be appropriate and even desirable in many cases to a subject coming to an existential commitment to Scripture.

We shouldn’t doubt the capacity of non-Christian texts to direct a reader to the true God and to a greater appreciation of his special revelation. Romans 1

makes it clear that even the nonbeliever understands many things about God through His general revelation: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made . . . .<sup>18</sup>” Clearly, God has gifted various thinkers through the ages to grapple with his revelation, and although their reasoning, if not submitted to the true God of the universe, will always fall short of adequately explaining our Heavenly Father or His salvation, their work can nonetheless be very powerful in addressing, from a human perspective, God working in our world. Clearly, it is not impossible that great works, ultimately as secondary expressions of God's *general* revelation and common grace, have the potential to direct their readers to the same God that made possible their (albeit finite) insight and beauty.

For instance, in her preface to *Invitation to the Classics, A Guide to Books You've Always Wanted to Read*<sup>19</sup>, Dr. Louise Cowan<sup>20</sup> recounts her experience with God, the Church and the Classics. She tells Her own personal story of having grown up in the Church, having learned all the correct rules and disciplines, but having lost her attraction to that form of dogma once she reached a point of intellectual maturity in her college years. Much later in life when studying the Classics in a graduate program, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* brought her back to a point of resuming her religious journey:

By the time I entered graduate school I had put aside the entire question of faith. But then, when reading *Hamlet* to my class, I saw incontestable

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<sup>18</sup> Romans 1:20

<sup>19</sup> Baker House, 1998 (co-edited by Os Guinness)

<sup>20</sup> Louise Cowan (Ph.D., Vanderbilt) is the former chairman of the English department and Dean of the Graduate School of the University of Dallas.

evidence that Shakespeare – or his chief protagonist, at least – had come to rely on divine power.

I poured over *Hamlet* several times during the ensuing months, each time finding further evidence of Shakespeare’s spiritual outlook. And gradually it became apparent that his perspective was not simply spiritual, but overtly Christian. Sacrificial love was evident everywhere in his dramas. *Grace* was one of his key words; *evil* was its darker counterpart. His comedies in particular were virtual illustrations of themes and passages from Scripture. . . .

Before literature came to my aid, I had perused theology in vain. Even the Bible was unconvincing. . . . I had been expecting logical proof of something one was expected to recognize. What was needed was a way of seeing. I had to be transformed in the way literature transforms – by story, image, symbol – before I could see the simple truths of the gospel.<sup>21</sup>

This is an experience I have heard recounted many times by others who were not able to embrace the life-changing power of God’s revelation as contained in Scripture until they experienced the (albeit inferior) life-changing power of other “great books,” great thinkers, or great art. We must be open to God using these secondary expressions of his own revelation to ultimately direct people to himself.

Similarly, Mortimer Adler, in his article *A Philosophers Religious Faith*, states:

It was through my study of philosophy, not through religious observances and rituals, that I became interested in God – as an object of thought, not as an object of love and worship. It was the God of Aristotle and of Spinoza, not the God of Judaism and of Christianity . . . .<sup>22</sup>

Adler notes that (mainly secular) philosophy initially awakened his interest in God, but did not immediately lead to a faith-response; instead, it begat a keen interest in religious philosophy and a sort of “intellectual” conversion to

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<sup>21</sup> Invitation to the Classics, *Id.* pp. 19-20.

<sup>22</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, *A Philosopher’s Religious Faith* as reproduced in Clark, *Philosophers Who Believe*, p. 205 (InterVarsity Press, 1993).

Christianity. After years of further study of philosophy, he later encountered a “life-crisis” (a severe virus that put him in bed for nearly a year) that forced him to decide whether he was willing to throw his “faith” into the God he already “knew” so much about. Adler tells the story in terms of taking the “great leap” into faith. Yet it cannot be denied that his intense studying of philosophy was part of his existential journey to Christ.

These experiences, while focused on the general religious conversions of Cowan and Adler to Christ, should lend credence to the premise that non-Scriptural sources of knowledge have the capacity to ultimately direct a seeker’s passions to Scripture. We should be able to trust that all those within whom God has stirred a genuine interest in seeking Him will eventually come to view Scripture as *incomparably superior* to all others sources. Additionally, we should expect that the “journey” to trusting Scripture will, itself, build an extra depth and dynamic into the subject’s own eventual love and understanding of their “Bride.”

### **VIII. Courting Scripture: *Drawn to Her Mystery***

As the relationship grows, the seeker (perhaps already a Christian, but still seeking) may become attracted, even enraptured, in particular majestic or mysterious portions of Scripture. While many may argue that the mysteries of our faith are the most difficult to grasp and thus should be reserved only for study by mature believers, I submit that these same difficult mysteries have the

capacity to *intrigue* the existential perspective and attract seekers to look harder into Scripture's contents.

Alder remarks on the importance of mysteries as a mark of *credibility* of religious belief:

A fourth criterion of the greatest importance is the extent to which God's self-revelation involves mysteries – mysteries, not miracles. Mysteries are articles of religious faith that exceed our natural human powers of knowing and understanding. They may be intelligible in themselves, but they are not completely intelligible to us.<sup>23</sup>

Alder points out several major “mysteries” unavoidable in Christian faith such as the nature of the Trinity, the incarnation of Jesus Christ's dual divine/human nature and the mystery of Christ's passion on the cross and of His resurrection and ascension. Indeed, these mysteries lead an observer to a point of seeing a God exceedingly bigger than themselves or their own capacity. They present a scenario wherein the rational intellect becomes so overloaded that the subject must choose either to *ascend* to faith or *resign* to denial. As seekers are exploring Scripture, we should not be surprised if the distinct mysteries of the Bible awakens their intellectual and emotional appetites and brings them closer to the point of existential commitment.

#### **IX. Courting Scripture: *Down on One Knee – The Point of Decision***

Months or years into the development of a seeker's relationship with Scripture, they will come to the point of existential confidence that the One they have pursued is so superior to all other sources of truth and knowledge and is so loaded with spiritual mysteries that overwhelm their cognitive abilities that they

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<sup>23</sup> Adler, *A Philosopher's Religious Faith*, Id. p. 218

are ready to “take the leap” and make a commitment to Her absolute authority. This is the culmination of a journey, not a shallow assent to an abstract theological doctrine. After a time of courtship, seeing what others have to offer, and being drawn to the superiority of Her contents, they gain the confidence to commit their mind and life to this chosen Bride. It (hopefully) did not happen overnight or in a moment’s wishful thinking, but after a process of getting to know their future soul mate they have determined that She is worth “forsaking all others.”

Therefore, we must grow to become comfortable with a lengthy (even lifelong), process of coming to know and trust the authority and superiority of Scripture. For some, the process may be relatively short; for we must remember that the Holy Spirit is ultimately the one directing this process and is surely able to bring a convert to a point of commitment to Scripture’s authority in a very short time. Therefore, we should not be surprised to see a seeker progress through the entire courtship process in a matter of days or weeks. However, for many this will be a multi-year process and that should not be discouraged – for if there is an internal (even if unarticulated) submission on the part of the seeker to God directing this process, timing becomes a matter that must be left to His sovereignty.

**X. Courting Scripture: “*As Long as You Both Shall Live*”**

Beyond even the point of life-commitment is the remaining life-long process of continuing to explore and grow in one’s love for Scripture and Her contents. In this sense, the point of commitment is both the end of one journey and the beginning of another. A level of love and certainty is required to bring the seeker to the point of making that initial commitment to cast his confidence in Scripture, but that love should continue to grow throughout the end of the convert’s life. Such is the case with all relationships. For instance, I knew I loved my wife when I proposed to her. I was *certain* she was worth committing the rest of my life to. However, my love and certainty is even stronger now, nearly six years later, than it was when I proposed – and I fully expect it will be stronger still in another six years. There are no limits to the growth of a relationship – especially one that has the Creator of the Universe and His very special revelation on one side of the equation.