By Good and Necessary Consequence: Preliminary Genealogy of Biblicist Foundationalism (Book Review)

Calvin Jongsm

Dordt College, calvin.jongsma@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation


Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol38/iss4/4

One of the five *Solas* of the Protestant Reformation, and the one often listed first, is *Sola Scriptura — by Scripture alone*. Reformers asserted this doctrine over against Roman Catholicism to emphasize not only that Scripture is God’s Word written but that it is the sole authority for matters pertaining to salvation, the only rule for Christian life. As the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) put it in 1646,

> The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. [Chapter I, Article VI]

The title of Bovell’s book comes from this passage. In affirming the authoritative primacy of Scripture, it seemed, at least to some later Protestants, that the WCF also took the Bible to be an inerrant sourcebook of propositional truths for theologians to develop into dogmatic theology by means of conclusive deductive reasoning. It is this biblicist foundationalism that Carlos Bovell finds problematic, even disturbing. His earlier book, *Inerrancy and the Spiritual Formation of Younger Evangelicals* (2007), focused on the pastoral dangers inherent in the contemporary evangelical Christian view of Scripture as a self-revelatory, inerrant, objective basis for doctrine and life. *By Good and Necessary Consequence* continues his negative examination of this trend by focusing on its alleged historical origins in the WCF.

Bovell’s overarching polemical goal in *By Good and Necessary Consequence* is thus to demonstrate that biblicist foundationalism is an inappropriate methodology and stance for evangelical Christianity today. In this book he uses scholarly historical and philosophical analyses to make his case.

In the first chapter Bovell links the rationalist tendency of the WCF to Cartesian deductivism. To combat the prevailing skepticism of the early seventeenth century as well as provide a sound alternative to Catholicism and religious enthusiasts, Westminster divines adopted an approach strikingly similar to Descartes’ foundationalist strategy, only using the Bible as their basis. The rigorous methodology of mathematics, exhibited in its axiomatic treatment of geometry, provided a model for generating sure knowledge in a time of uncertainty.

After introducing his thesis concerning the WCF’s adoption of biblicist foundationalism, Bovell argues the novelty of such a deductivist epistemology by looking at earlier understandings and uses of the axiomatic deductive method. In successive chapters he presents several historical case studies: the origins of deductive science in Pythagorean theorizing; the role of deductive and dialectical reasoning in Plato’s thought; Aristotle’s use of mathematical demonstration for philosophical purposes; Euclid’s deductive procedure in his *Elements*; Proclus’ deductive metaphysics and theology; and Boethius’ axiomatic approach to ethics, along with Aquinas’ extended commentary thereon. In each case, Bovell concentrates on the role played by deductive reasoning, arguing that it lacked the epistemological import it was given by seventeenth-century philosophers and scientists.

With these case studies on the use of the axiomatic method in place, Bovell contrasts the earlier viewpoints with those of Descartes and the WCF. The central conclusion he draws from the comparisons he makes is that the deductive method made prominent by mathematics is an inadequate epistemic instrument for philosophy and theology. In particular, it fails to account for the subjectivity and uncertainty inherent in interpreting Scripture. Furthermore, as significant twentieth-century technical developments in foundations of mathematics show, an axiomatic approach cannot guarantee the completeness of the theory resulting from its deductive basis (Gödel’s incompleteness theorem).

The book ends with a couple of tangential non-historical essays. Chapter 11 points out the potential perils to one’s faith when its presumed biblicist foundation is challenged. And the final chapter sketches a Husserlian alternative to biblicist foundationalism. Though these don’t advance the main thesis of his work, they do address Bovell’s overall aim to replace bibliocrist foundationalism with something better.

As a Christian mathematics educator professionally interested in historical and philosophical matters, I found the book’s treatment of its topics engaging. It’s not often one gets to read a book that combines mathematics, theology, and philosophy in an interesting and thoughtful way. Bovell’s training in and attachment to theology and philosophy may be stronger than his background in...
Bovell's ambitious attitude toward fashion, showing how the lumpy cerulean color of the sweater she's wearing is the color it is because of what Oscar de la Renta and St Laurent did several years earlier. In other words, you are affected by the actions of the fashion world whether you know it or not. And in the same way that French fashion trickles down to the stuff you buy from the “Nearly New” store, French philosophy and Post-Modern thought from philosophers like Derrida, Smith suggests, can affect how you think and act.

Don’t let the title scare you off. You don’t have to understand Derrida to understand Smith—you don’t even have to know who Derrida is, though you might want to find out after you have read the clever little title essay. In it Smith quotes a speech by fashion-czar Miranda (Meryl Streep) from the movie The Devil Wears Prada in which Miranda chastises her assistant Andy for her scornful attitude toward fashion, showing how the lumpy cerulean