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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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The Gospel Coalition: The “New Calvinism’s” Attack on the Bible and Its Epistemology

by Stephen M. Cope

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Contending for the Faith or Compromising the Fundamentals

Every generation of American Evangelical Protestantism since 1800 has attempted to unite Evangelicals in common cause against the perceived theological attacks and spiritual crises of their day. In the late 1700s, the students of Jonathan Edwards, including his own son, Jonathan Edwards, Jr. promoted a theological movement known as the New Divinity Men. Their stated goal was to fight Rationalism and the Enlightenment while attempting to reconcile their recent experiences of revival in the Great Awakening with the Old Calvinism of their Puritan fathers. Their hopes were to advance the revival of the 1700s into the new century before them so that they might promote a godly population for the new American Republic. Their movement gave birth to the New School Calvinists (and later the New School Presbyterians) who believed that perpetuating both revival and social reform on a national level superseded the need for what they considered to be the unnecessary doctrinal precision demanded by the Old School

Calvinists such as Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and Robert Lewis Dabney. The New School Presbyterians were led by men such as Lyman Beecher, Albert Barnes, George Duffield, and perhaps the movement’s most famous advocate, Charles Finney. These men maintained that Biblical orthodoxy was not nearly as important as leading the crusade for national reform and advancing the cause of perfecting society. Many of these New School Calvinists were involved in the Abolitionist movement, the temperance movement, advocacy for work reform, and the elimination of child labor in the United States.

This same spirit was revived in the 20th century with the arrival of the “New Evangelicals” who believed that Christian Fundamentalism had embraced anti-intellectualism and rejected the necessary social reform programs that they believed would ultimately defeat Modernism and Neo-Orthodoxy. While each of these movements may appear different in nature and scope, all three of them (New Divinity, New School Calvinism, and New Evangelicalism) illustrate how American Evangelicalism has earnestly pursued a coalition-like network to advance its theological and ethical beliefs in the hopes of stemming the tide of evil and promoting the cause of outward religion in the republic. Now that we are 13 years into the 21st century, we should not be surprised to find Evangelicals once again forming yet another coalition to combat the rising tide of

postmodernism. The Gospel Coalition is the latest effort of 21st century Evangelicals to create a new united front within the American church.

Since their first national conference in May 2007, the influence of the Gospel Coalition (TGC) has spread quickly through Evangelical Protestantism. Under a diverse collection of leaders, including Dr. Timothy Keller of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), Dr. D. A. Carson of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, John Piper, the ever popular Baptist pastor and promoter of Edwards-like theology for the 21st century, and Mark Driscoll,¹ the truly postmodern Evangelical, known as the “cussing pastor,” the Coalition has drawn an unusual collection of theological and denominational traditions into a growing movement whose influence is spreading far and fast.

The Coalition itself was primarily the brainchild of Keller, pastor of the well-known Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and theologian Carson. Prior to its organization, both men expressed their desire to rekindle Evangelical churches in the tradition of the New Evangelicalism of Post-World War II America.² These two men along with Piper, Philip Ryken (who at that time was still the Senior Minister of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, formerly pastored by the late Dr. James M. Boice), Driscoll, and the well-known PCA pastor Dr. Ligon Duncan (now Chancellor at Reformed Theological Seminary) joined forces to explore the establishment of a new Evangelical network. In 2005, these men met with other prominent Evangelical leaders to gauge their acceptance of this new proposal.³ Those who attended readily accepted the idea, and in 2006, they met again to finalize the drafts of the TGC’s *Confessional Statement* and *Theological Vision for Ministry*.

¹ On March 28, 2012, GC’s website announced that Mark Driscoll was resigning from the executive council of the GC for personal reasons. See <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/03/28/driscoll-steps-down-from-tgc-council/>.

² See history of the Gospel Coalition: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/history>. This article provides an account of the events leading to the first national conference in 2007.

³ See <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/history>.

The membership of TGC’s current Executive Council reveals the true diversity of this movement. Membership ranges from the more traditional Evangelical denominations to the truly left-wing postmodern Evangelicals. The traditionalists include Southern Baptists Albert Mohler, the reforming president of Southern Seminary in Louisville, and Mark Dever, pastor of Capital Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D. C., and Drs. Ligon Duncan and Richard Phillips of the PCA. More moderate members include Charismatics with some Reformed sympathies such as C. J. Mahaney, Joshua Harris, and John Piper who spans both the Baptist and Charismatic flanks of the movement. Far left postmodern Evangelicals are represented by Tim Keller and Kevin DeYoung. With leaders such as these, one can only imagine the diversity of theological traditions that constitute TGC.

Other than holding conferences, TGC has drafted two foundational documents expressing its core beliefs, aims, goals, and mission. Both documents themselves are relatively unknown, but their ideas are spreading like wildfire across a disillusioned Evangelical America seeking to come to grips with the trauma of a postmodern world. TGC’s *Confessional Statement* (CS hereafter) was written by Carson and the *Theological Vision for Ministry* (TMV hereafter) by Keller.⁴ The CS affirms little of significance other than repeating many of the same old vague and ill-defined theological definitions that Evangelicals have bantered around for several decades. While it does reflect a mildly Calvinistic influence, the CS leaves plenty of wiggle room for non-Calvinists and other theological traditions who have joined the venture. However, the TMV expresses a more novel perspective that is slowly coming into vogue within Evangelicalism. That document rather exhaustively (if somewhat unsystematically) expresses the concerns of various pastors within TGC that the Evangelical church has failed to address both philosophically and culturally the new postmodern world. The TMV calls for a renewed emphasis on unity among Evangelicals in

⁴ See <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/history>. While both Keller and Carson penned the original drafts of each document, significant revisions of both were adopted at the 2006 Colloquium.

both doctrine and practice, and offers a new focus on addressing social problems, reclaiming the culture, and promoting a greater tolerance of the present day's diverse religious landscape. The *TVM* pays tribute to the Protestantism of the past in vague terms, but the document expresses a yearning to move beyond what it views as Traditional Protestantism in order to confront the new theological challenges of the day.

On the surface, much of the contents of both the *CS* and the *TVM* will definitely appeal to the concerns of the contemporary Evangelical. But a more careful and theologically precise evaluation of these documents will reveal that in fact these men are not reuniting Evangelicals around the fundamentals of the faith in opposing the rising threat of postmodernism; rather they are completely rewriting Evangelical theology to fit within a postmodern paradigm. This article will examine the theological and philosophical claims of these documents and the ideas preached by the leaders of TGC to determine if indeed they reflect a true contending for the faith or a complete abandonment of the Bible and its epistemology.

Foundational Perspective: The Bible's View of Man's Knowledge of God

In beginning such a study, it is important to lay out the parameters and presuppositions that will guide our examination of TGC. The author holds two fundamental principles that will guide this study: 1. The Bible is the very Word of God, inspired, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative in all matters of faith and practice. 2. The primary theological framework of this study is the system of doctrine contained in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and its related *Catechisms*. Therefore, it is proper to assume that these presuppositions will influence the author's interpretation and analysis of TGC documents. One other foundational presupposition ought to be established from the outset. Many of the theological issues discussed in TGC's founding documents are theological responses to postmodernism's focus on discrediting the concept that there is any certainty or objectivity within human knowledge, particularly as it relates to matters of faith and reason. Therefore, in order to offer an appropriate background to some of these

issues, I will begin with a brief presentation of the Biblical view of man's knowledge of God and his truth. This brief discourse will not allow for an exhaustive study to the questions relating to a distinctly Christian epistemology, but it will present a brief survey of key Scripture passages regarding man's knowledge of God and truth.

Both the Old and New Testament Scriptures clearly declare that God made man in his own image, and an essential part of that image is man's ability to know God in terms of a personal relationship. The fact that the Bible declares that it is God's revelation of himself to man, and the Bible's continual theme of God's covenant relationship with his own chosen people presupposes that man possesses the ability to know God in propositional terms. Granted the Bible also teaches that sin has marred that image, hampering man's ability to know God in many ways. Thus, without the operation of the Holy Spirit in a person's heart creating faith and spiritual life within, man cannot know God truly, and will not choose to know God by his own will. The Bible is very clear, however, that God, though infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being and all his attributes (*WSC*, Q. 4), can be known by man in terms of rational propositions. But the question naturally arises, by what means can man know God? Time and space does not permit an exhaustive study of this question, but the scope of this article does not require such a detailed examination. Let us consider a few Scriptures that speak about man's knowledge of God.

The first Scripture to note is *1 John* 4:1-2. In fact, these verses are the very reason for offering this evaluation of the theology of TGC. Note carefully what the Apostle writes under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world." Notice that God has commanded not just the leadership of the church, but every Christian to test every spirit he encounters to determine if that spirit has come from God or is of the evil one. The reason we are to test every spirit, the Holy Spirit tells us, is that *many* false prophets are in the world even now. But how are we to test spirits, especially when we cannot even see a spirit, nor know what one is? God

knows this question will logically arise in our minds, and he answers it in the very next verse: “By this you *know* the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God.” We must note two key points from this verse: First, John writes that we can know if a spirit we encounter has come from God or has not come from God. This point is vital to understand. God has not left his church without a witness to the truth, and God has also told us that we *can know* the truth. Second, notice the means by which a true spirit is distinguished from a false one—through a *propositional* confession of sound doctrine. How does one know if a spirit has come from God? That spirit will confess the truth about the person and work of Jesus Christ and not contradict the Scripture. And where does one find a true knowledge of Jesus Christ and his saving work? The sole source from which men and women may know the Gospel is the Holy Scripture. The Bible alone gives an infallible revelation of Jesus Christ as the sole Redeemer of men, and the only Mediator between God and man, and it alone has a systematic monopoly on truth.

Another key Scripture concerning a Biblical perspective on man’s knowledge of God is found in *I Corinthians 2:14*. Note carefully what Paul writes about the nature of true knowledge: “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolish to him; nor can he know them because they are *spiritually discerned*.” The natural man, the person who has not been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, cannot receive any truth about God because such truth is spiritual and is only discerned or understood spiritually. A true knowledge of God is spiritual in nature, and without a true spiritual understanding of God given to us by the Holy Spirit, we can never truly know God. Thus, the unregenerate man will never gain a true knowledge of God, but those who have been regenerated by the Spirit of God *can know* God truly.

Third, a true knowledge of God, our fellow men and life on Earth is propositional. Consider Paul’s statement in *Romans 10:10*: “For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the *mouth confession* is made unto salvation.” While the work of salvation begins in the soul of a person (with the heart man believes), that work of salvation

manifests itself with a *verbal confession*. And what is that confession? A true saving confession of faith is that Christ died for my sins, and on this point, the New Testament is abundantly clear: Without such confession of faith, a man or woman cannot be a true Christian.

From this point, we learn a fourth doctrine about man’s knowledge of God: God’s truth is an historical fact recorded in Scripture. Consider Paul’s summary statement of the Gospel in *I Corinthians 15:3-4*: “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures*, and that *he was buried*, and that *he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures*.” Note well that when Paul summarizes the Gospel, and specifically that fundamental doctrine which proves that the Gospel is indeed God’s message to sinners, namely, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, he summarizes the Gospel in terms of a statement of historical fact that is *according to the Scripture*. The Gospel is not a potential, or even an imperative; rather it is an historical fact recorded and declared in the Scripture. In fact Paul spends the rest of the chapter arguing the consequences of not believing in the resurrection of Christ *according to the Scripture*. Human knowledge of the Gospel—of all things—is rooted in our understanding of the revelation of the Gospel and its implications rooted in the infallible history the Bible gives us of Christ’s death and resurrection for the redemption of sinners. This is why Machen described this verse as “an absolutely indissoluble union” of both history and true doctrine.⁵

But the Scripture does more than offer a positive definition of human knowledge. The New Testament also describes a false knowledge of God. This false knowledge is described in *Colossians 2*, and note the contrast that Paul paints as he describes this false form of knowledge as it relates to true spiritual knowledge:

Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.... Beware lest anyone cheat [literally, plunder] you through philosophy

⁵ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, [1923] 2002), 27.

and empty deceit, according to the traditions of men, according to the basic principles [elements] of this world, and not according to Christ.... So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance [literally, the body] is of Christ. Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase which is from God. Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles [elements] of the world, why, as though living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations – “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using – according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, false humility, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the flesh. (*Colossians* 2:4, 8, 16-23)

This false religious knowledge of God is described in the following terms: Its nature is vain speculation, and its origins are not divine, but from human tradition and rooted in the basic principles of earthly living and practice. This false knowledge offers no certainty, but is subjective, speculative, and rooted in the individual. It relies on so-called “self-evident” axioms and traditions commonly accepted by sin-cursed and depraved men as good religious and philosophical ideas. This material form of knowledge prides itself on outward practices, rules, and regulations, and even has an appearance of religion, but as Paul emphatically states such knowledge is not according to Christ and the Scripture. Much more could be said, but this one point is vital: Man can know God, but a true knowledge of God and the world is spiritual. Knowledge that is not truly Biblical is not spiritual, but material, fleshly, sense-oriented and focused on the creation and not the Creator. Any review of the history of Christian theology reveals that most

heresy comes from two key errors: 1. Rejection of God’s Word as the sole and final authority for faith and life, and 2. Men’s elevation of a material knowledge of the principles of creation as the governing law of all doctrine and theology. It is this embrace of a material, fleshly knowledge that leads men away from the truth of God. Therefore, as we proceed with our examination of TGC, let us ask this question: To which form of knowledge does the doctrine of TGC conform? Does it conform to the attributes of true spiritual knowledge outlined in Scripture? Or does it conform to the materialistic knowledge of those false teachers who glory in vain speculations, but offer no true knowledge of God, his truth and his Gospel? These principles of knowledge from the Scripture will guide our study, and by God’s grace, help us to discern truth from error.

The Gospel Coalition’s Theory of Unknowable Truth and Subjective Knowledge

The most recent attack against the foundations of historic Christianity has come through the epistemological and philosophical movement known as postmodernism. This “new” philosophy posits that there is no such thing as an objective verifiable reality, but reality is something that is purely subjective created by individuals, and therefore, relative to what an individual makes it out to be. Apply this principle of thought (if indeed it can be called a rational form of thought) to literature, the arts, economics, politics and culture, and the result is the culture of irrationality which has characterized the first decade of the 21st century. Naturally, this philosophy does require a Christian response, and a survey of the foundation documents of TGC will reveal that this new generation of American Evangelicals is attempting to answer this philosophy, especially in regards to the nature of truth. The question the Christian must ask is, what kind of response are the men of TGC offering, and does it square with Scripture?

In one sense, this new generation of Evangelicals should be lauded for attempting to respond to this new secular and philosophical attack against the Christian faith, and for adopting a different epistemological perspective on the nature of truth. This new perspective is essentially a rejection of the

old Common Sense philosophy rooted in various forms of both sensory experience and rationalism of 19th and 20th century Evangelicals. In fact, the *TVM* specifically states that “We adopt a ‘chastened’ correspondence–theory of truth that is less triumphalistic than that of some in the older evangelicalism.”⁶ In some ways, this rejection of the old Common Sense philosophy is an improvement to the views on knowledge held by previous generations of Evangelicals who under the influence of Jonathan Edwards adopted a modified version of both Scottish Realism and the philosophy of the English Deist John Locke in regards to knowledge and experience,⁷ a position regarding truth that this author would soundly reject. But how does their new “chastened” view, as they call it, square with the Scripture? The writers of TGC’s foundation documents, rather than offering a more Biblical approach to the understanding of truth, have instead simply embraced the spirit of this age and are articulating nothing more than a “Christianized” version of postmodernism.

What exactly is TGC’s view on the nature of truth? The *TVM* offers the following definition: “We affirm that truth is correspondence to reality” (Section I, Paragraph 1). Individuals whose thinking has been shaped by the irrationality of our age will find few problems with this statement. But a careful analysis of these words will reveal a shockingly un-Biblical definition of truth. This statement, while affirming the existence of some vague objective reality, does not provide a definition of the reality to which truth corresponds according to Scripture.

But the document does not stop there. In the third paragraph, the assertion of subjective, conformable “truth,” is affirmed in an even more blatant manner: “We affirm that truth is correspondence of life to God. Truth is not only a theoretical correspondence but also a covenantal relationship.... Truth, then, is correspondence between our entire lives and God’s heart, words and actions, through the mediation of the Word and Spirit” (*TVM*, I.3). Truth then,

according to this document is a life lived in correspondence to God. Once again, the authors have affirmed that truth is not objective, but a subjective experience formed by the sensory interactions of our lives with God, but ultimately rooted in the subject, that is, in man himself. Therefore, truth grows out of experience. The fundamental problem is that truth is subjective, not objective; experiential, not propositional; and most significant of all, it is not rational or absolute but constantly changing in terms of the dynamic of human experience. This irrationality is further demonstrated by the statement that “Truth is...a covenantal relationship.” Truth ceases to be even a linguistic, propositional and rational reality; rather it exists as a subjective “reality” that conforms to the changing flux of the subject, the subject’s interpretation of data, and possesses a certain dynamic quality of personality, though, again such personality or lack of personality is never defined. By definition, a covenant is an agreement between two or more persons.⁸ So if truth is a covenantal relationship, then the question must be asked, what is truth? Please notice the language TGC leadership employs. It is not that man has a relationship *with truth* (as if truth was one of the parties in a covenant). Truth *is* a covenantal relationship. Once again, Truth is not objective but subjective, and defined by the two parties in the relationship. So two questions naturally arise: 1. Who are the two parties? (And more importantly), 2. If the truth is defined by two parties involved in a relationship, and the dynamic quality that results from that relationship (whatever that may be) what then is this truth? The authors never answer this question because they do not actually believe in a verifiable, objective, rational and propositional truth. Hence truth is relative and defined by subjective experience. This is nothing but postmodernism.

What is the natural consequence of such a view of truth? TGC’s *TVM* affirms the following in Paragraph 4 of Section I – Epistemology: “But we also reject a view of truth that sees truth as nothing more than the internally coherent language of a particular faith-community.” Truth, according to TGC then, is *not* a logical system of thought rooted

⁶ Section I. 4. 1 of the *TVM*, spelling sic. The entire text of both the Confessional Statement and the *TVM* can be found at <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/who>.

⁷ George Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 466.

⁸ *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*.

in rational propositions of Scripture believed by the church. By this statement, leaders of TGC, and those who become members of TGC by affirming it, have not only affirmed that truth is non-propositional, they have denied that the “faith once delivered to the saints” (*Jude* 3) must have a logical and rational set of defined terms. No matter what they may say in other statements of belief, by affirming this statement, they have denied verbal, plenary inspiration, the infallibility of Scripture, a rational and logical hermeneutic, and a coherent systematic theology. Therefore, according to them, the Christian faith is not rooted in God’s words recorded in Holy Scripture, but in an experience, a sensory experience at that, and one derived from our own subjective understanding of reality.

As any student of church history will recognize, this language is nothing more than the old modernist liberal theology of the 1910s and 1920s repackaged in 21st century terms. Worst of all, it attacks the Bible as the *Word* of God, and the very rationality of our faith in a propositional book that has come from God. This is the result of a subjective concept of truth.

A surprising defender of this view of truth is Dr. Richard Philips, senior pastor of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina and a member of TGC Executive Council. Dr. Philips authored one of several booklets intended to explain TGC’s theological positions. Philips’ book, *Can We Know the Truth*, uses language similar to that of the *TVM* to explain what he calls “an Evangelical Christian epistemology.”⁹ Philips’ definition of an “Evangelical Christian epistemology” is “truth correspond(ing) to reality,” a strikingly similar phrase to that in *TMV*. Philips goes on to explain this view. He writes that “the basis of this Christian doctrine of real truth is that God exists,” and “It is because of our belief in the Bible that Christians believe that *truth corresponds to reality*.”¹⁰ According to Philips, a distinctly Christian epistemology starts with the presupposition of the existence of God, but *not* the presupposition that the Bible is *the Word* of God.

How are Christians, who believe that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God to respond to such teachings? What does the Scripture say about truth? Jesus gives a very simple answer to that question recorded in his high priestly prayer in *John* 17:17. Referring to the written Scriptures of the Old Testament, Christ declares, “Your (God’s) word *is* truth.” Notice carefully what Jesus says and does not say in that statement: He did not say that God’s *thoughts* were truth; though indeed every thought of the living God is indeed truth. He did not say that God’s *actions* were truth. No, Christ said none of these. In his prayer to God the Father, Christ stated, “*Your word is truth*.” But this text is not the only statement of Scripture concerning the nature of truth. Consider how many times in *Psalms* 119, the psalmist makes a similar declaration: “And Your *law* is Truth.” ... “And *all* Your *commandments* are truth.” ... “The *entirety* of Your *word* is truth” (verses 142, 151, and 160). Consider also Paul’s own statement in *Colossians* 1:5 when he says that the Colossian believers heard “the word of the truth of the gospel.” Notice that Paul equates the Gospel not only with verbal and / or written propositional declarations, but also with truth itself. Therefore, if we are to be Biblically precise in this matter, Christians must affirm that truth is the Word of God which reveals the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But the Scripture does more than just claim that God’s inspired and inerrant Word is both the absolute truth and the ultimate objective reality. The Scripture also claims that knowledge of that objective, absolute truth is also an objective knowledge. Consider why Luke wrote his *Gospel*: he wanted Theophilus to “know the certainty of the things in which you were instructed” (*Luke* 1:4). Luke wanted his readers to have assurance that the things they were taught concerning Christ were not just a subjective knowledge of experience, but an objective knowledge verifiable with evidence and rational thought. John makes similar statements in both his *Gospel* and his *First Epistle* (*John* 20:31; *1 John* 1:1, 4:2). But perhaps the most significant passage that affirms an objective knowledge of the Gospel is Paul’s own argument defending the historical reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ (see *1 Corinthians* 15). In that chapter Paul not only affirms the historicity of the resurrection, he

⁹ Richard Philips, *Can We Know the Truth*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 12.

¹⁰ Philips, *Can We Know the Truth*, 13.

establishes that the Gospel message is *not* a potential event or an ethical command. Rather the Gospel is a statement of historical fact revealed in the Scriptures: “Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures” (15:3). Paul then proceeds to testify to the reality of the resurrection as both a verifiable historical event and one that can be objectively known through the testimony of witnesses, of which, according to Paul, the resurrection has plenty! Further, Peter, who had the experience of witnessing the transfiguration of the Lord Jesus Christ, wrote,

For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For he received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount. *We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts....* (2 Peter 1:16-19 KJV, emphasis added)

So then we must conclude that the Scripture maintains that knowledge of the Gospel is objective and not rooted in subjective experience or personal impressions, but in the propositional Word of God.

No doubt, the question will arise, what makes that knowledge objective? The answer is rather simple. Our knowledge of the Gospel is objective because we have the *Words* of God, breathed out by the Holy Spirit, and preserved in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments. Consider what TGC affirms in contrast to the testimony of Scripture: “But we also reject a view of truth that sees truth as nothing more than the internally coherent language of a particular faith-community.” Contrast this statement with the many affirmations of Scripture to the contrary. In 2 Timothy 1:13, Paul commands Timothy to hold fast to the “pattern of *sound words*.” John offers a similar exhortation when he urges his readers to abide in the teachings (doctrine) that Christ has given and that doctrine is distilled in

propositional form (2 John 9-11). Romans 10:9-10 declare that saving faith will *verbally confess* the teaching of the Gospel. Therefore, such a confession of faith must be rooted in language and therefore, propositional, rational, and according to the Scripture. One of the best statements of this propositional confession is found in 1 John 4:2. The apostle commands his readers to test the spirits. No doubt, you have read that statement and asked how do I test a spirit, when I cannot even see one, and I don’t exactly know what a spirit is. John gives to us a very clear and objective way by which we as believers are to test the spirits. Any person who confesses that Christ is God come in the flesh is from God, and any other confession is contrary to sound doctrine. Consider the nature of that confession: It is a statement of belief in the truth revealed in the Bible. How then do we test the spirits? We do so by comparing everything thing we hear with the divine declarations of Holy Scripture.

Perhaps the best defense of a propositional confession of faith comes from the very mouth of the Lord Jesus himself. In Matthew 16, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” Peter, ever the bold one, and often the spokesman for all the twelve declares, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (verse 16). Jesus’ reply is most instructive: He not only pronounces a blessing on Peter for making that confession, which he states can only be made by supernatural means, but he also declares “on this rock, I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). Through serious hermeneutical abuse, the Church of Rome has gotten a lot mileage out of this verse by claiming that Jesus made Peter the first pope at this point, and established papal authority. Nothing could be further from the truth. A careful examination of the Greek will reveal a precision not found in English. In Greek, gender is very important in determining word usage. In this passage, Christ uses the Greek word, *Petros*, twice. The first reference is in the masculine gender, and is obviously a reference to Peter as it is his very name. It is here that Jesus changes the disciple’s name from Simon to Peter, or *Petros*, meaning “rock.” But the next use of the word is a different gender. Hence in the Greek, the verse reads something like this: “And I say unto you that you are *Petros*, (*Rock*,

Peter), and on this *Petra* (*Rock*, but in the feminine gender), I will build my church....”

A key interpretative question is to what does Christ refer in the second use of the word *Petros*, since he employs a different gender. Again, obviously, it *cannot* be a reference to Peter, or else why would Christ have used the feminine gender? Therefore, on that basis, Peter cannot be the first pope. But a more important issue arises from the text. Why did Jesus use a different gender in referring to a *Petra* upon which the church would be built? Here is where context is absolutely essential in determining the use and precise meaning of the word. Remember that Christ is seeking to elicit a confession from his disciples concerning his deity and his Messianic ministry. And Peter, as the spokesman for the disciples, affirms that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. Christ replies by not only changing Peter’s name, but he changes Peter’s name to reflect the inner change in Peter’s heart because he declares that such a confession can only be made by a heart regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

Was it Peter that was significant in this case? No, the significance is Peter’s *confession* of who Christ is, and Christ declares that it is on Peter’s *confession* (and upon Christ as the chief cornerstone – *Ephesians 2:20*) that the church shall be built and shall prevail against the gates of hell. What did Peter confess? He confessed the same standard by which John told his readers to test the spirits—a verbal, rational statement concerning the objective truth about the Person and Messianic work of Jesus Christ. Peter’s confession of Christ was verbal, propositional, rational, and employed an “*internally coherent language*” (*TVM I.4.1*). Thus, even from the mouth of Jesus, the church is built upon a proposition concerning the Person and Work of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the chosen one of God to redeem his people from their sins.

What then are the implications of TGC’s view on the subjective nature of truth on Christian theology and thought? The most significant impact of TGC’s view is the deconstruction of any objective meaning communicated through the words of Scripture. And if one thing becomes immediately clear regarding the foundation documents of TGC, it is this: these men do not subscribe to the historical, orthodox,

and Biblical declarations regarding the Bible as the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God.

The Gospel Coalition’s Deconstruction of God’s Propositional Revelation in the Holy Scripture

As Christians who affirm the Bible to be the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God, a wrong view of truth will significantly alter one’s view of and interpretation of the Scripture. If truth is not absolute, and the knowledge of truth is subjective, then surely Christianity cannot be dogmatic about making absolute claims; rather, it must be willing to accommodate other views and interpretations of God, man, sin, salvation, truth, and knowledge. And this type of accommodation is exactly what is found in the foundation documents. The most egregious examples are found in the documents’ low view of Scripture.

The first indication of their low view of Scripture is their justification for the arrangement of doctrines in their *Confessional Statement*. The CS begins by affirming the character of God in Paragraph 1. Paragraph 2 concerning the Scripture follows and is brief and vaguely worded. Carson and Keller defend this arrangement of the priority of the doctrine of God over the doctrine of Scripture in TGC booklet they co-authored titled *Gospel-Centered Ministry*. They falsely claim that systematic theology was an unfortunate byproduct of Protestants who were overly influenced by Enlightenment thinking. They then write that this view of knowledge which begins with the Scripture “leads readers [of the Bible] to the over-confidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a perfect system of doctrinal truth.”¹¹ Not only is this argument against

¹¹ D. A. Carson and Timothy Keller, *Gospel-Centered Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011), 6. Here is the full text for the sub-section “Beginning with God”:

We also thought it was important to begin our confession with God rather than with Scripture. This is significant. The Enlightenment was overconfident about human rationality. Some strands of it assumed it was possible to build systems of thought on unaided human reason. Despite their frequent vilification of the Enlightenment, many conservative evangelicals have nevertheless been shaped by it. This can be seen in how many evangelical

statements of faith start with the Scripture, not with God. They proceed from Scripture to doctrine through rigorous exegesis in order to build (what they consider) an absolutely sure, guaranteed-true-to-Scripture theology.

The problem is that this is essentially a foundationalist approach to knowledge. It ignores the degree to which our cultural location affects our interpretation of the Bible, and it assumes a very rigid subject-object distinction. It ignores historical theology, philosophy, and cultural reflection. Starting with the Scripture leads readers to the overconfidence that their exegesis of biblical texts has produced a system of perfect doctrinal truth. This can create pride and rigidity because it may not sufficiently acknowledge the fallenness of human reason.

We believe it is best to start with God, to declare (with John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.1) that without knowledge of God we cannot know ourselves, our world, or anything else. If there is no God, we would have no reason to trust our reason. (*Gospel-Centered Ministry*, 6)

The striking irony here is that in the previous section, Carson and Keller stated, “we sought to express our faith as much as possible in biblical-theological categories rather than drawing on the terminology of any particular tradition’s systematic theology” (6). Then they proceed on the same page to cite the most identifiable (and often most hated) systematic theologian of the conservative evangelical tradition as justification for starting with God and not Scripture. Furthermore, Calvin does not say we are to start with God, but with the *knowledge* of God, as he states in his *Commentary on Jeremiah* 44:1-7: “And I have said that religion ought not to be separated from knowledge; *but I call that knowledge, not what is innate in man, or what is by diligence acquired, but that which is delivered to us by the Law and the Prophets*” (emphasis added). Compare also the following:

The course which God followed towards his Church from the very first, was to supplement these common proofs by the addition of his Word, *as a surer and more direct means of discovering himself.... I am only showing that it is necessary to apply Scripture*, in order to learn the sure marks which distinguish God, as the Creator of the world, from the whole herd of fictitious gods.... It being thus manifest that God, *foreseeing the inefficiency of his image imprinted on the fair form of the universe, has given the assistance of his Word to all whom he*

confessional and systematic theology a classic straw man argument, but it also reveals Carson and Keller’s low view of the Scripture. But this reversed emphasis is only the beginning of their low view of Scripture.

Paragraph two of the *CS* continues to display their low view of Scripture. That paragraph employs two troubling words in describing how God’s Word is communicated through Scripture. The *CS* reads: “Moreover, this God is a speaking God who by his Spirit has graciously disclosed himself in *human words*” (emphasis added). The distinction may appear minor, but it is highly troubling nonetheless. Are we to make a distinction between the divine words and the human words? If that is the case, then are we to make a distinction between human language and divine language? What then, is the Bible filled with both human words and divine words? What is the difference between human words and divine words? How do we know which words are human and which are divine? And given the already subjective view of “truth” and of a subjective knowledge of that “truth,” how are we to know if there is such a thing as divine words or if the Bible is only divine truth communicated through human words? But none of those questions are the real problem with this phrase. By positing a difference in human language and divine language, the phrase claims that the language of God is somehow qualitatively different from the language in which the Scripture was written and therefore, the actual “words” of Scripture are not divine in and of themselves because they are “*human words.*” The

has ever been pleased to instruct effectually, we, too, must pursue this straight path, if we aspire in earnest to a genuine contemplation of God;—we must go, I say, to the Word, where the character of God, drawn from his works is described accurately and to the life; these works being estimated, not by our depraved judgment, but by the standard of eternal truth.... Since the human mind, through its weakness, was altogether unable to come to God if not aided and upheld by his sacred Word, it necessarily followed that all mankind, the Jews excepted, inasmuch as they sought God without the Word, were laboring under vanity and error. (Institutes 1.6.1-4, Beveridge translation, emphasis added)

result then is that we do not actually have the “words of God.” This view is essentially Neo-Orthodox, and is neither Reformed nor Evangelical. The writers are affirming the same view of Scripture held by Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Daniel Fuller of Fuller Theological Seminary. In fact, this view of Scripture would not even pass muster in a strict Romanist seminary, for according to these men the very words themselves are not God’s words, but God’s truth communicated through *man’s* words. Lest we should think that this phrase was just an inadvertent typo, Section 1, Paragraph 2 of the *TVM* further clarifies what is meant by “human words.”

We affirm that truth is *conveyed* by Scripture. We believe that Scripture is *pervasively propositional*, and that all statements of Scripture are completely true and authoritative. *But the truth of Scripture cannot be exhausted in a series of propositions.* It exists in the genres of narrative, metaphor, and poetry *which are not exhaustively distillable into doctrinal propositions*, yet they convey God’s will and mind to us so as to change us into his likeness. (Emphasis added)

Here we find their theory of a subjective knowledge of truth which we examined above applied to the doctrine of Scripture. This subjective truth they claim to believe, which corresponds to a vague undefined, but objective reality (even that concept itself is irrational), is *conveyed* by Scripture. The verb *conveyed* is the fundamental problem with this statement. Again, the *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* defines *convey* in the following terms: “to make known, to impart or communicate; to conduct through a medium or channel.” So this subjective truth that corresponds to something greater than itself is communicated *via* or *through the medium of* the Scripture. Therefore, a distinction is being made between *truth* (whatever that may be), and the Scripture. The obvious implication of that statement is that the very *words* of Scripture (which according to the *CS* are “human words”), are not themselves divine, but only a medium, and therefore, the *words* of Scripture are *not* the *words of God*. Any elementary student of the history of 20th century theology will

immediately recognize the similarity of these statements to those of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who expounded the popular Neo-Orthodoxy of the 1930s and 1940s, and posited such a view of Scripture, allowing them to still claim to “believe” the Scripture by faith while rejecting such things as a literal account of creation, an historical Adam, and even an historical resurrection. Hence they were called the “New Orthodox” men. As problematic as this statement is, the paragraph goes on to develop a completely irrational and un-Biblical view of Scripture.

The paragraph continues, “Scripture is pervasively propositional.” The *American Heritage College Dictionary* defines *pervasive* as “present throughout.” Therefore, propositions are present throughout the Scripture (never mind the absurdity of stating that linguistic propositions are present throughout a work of literature), but this statement is contradicted in the next statement when it states that this subjective truth that corresponds to something (who knows what) *cannot* be “exhausted in a series of propositions.” So the Scripture is filled with propositions, but not all of the Scripture can be reduced to *doctrinal* propositions, because “It exists in the genres of narrative, metaphor, and poetry.” (Question: How does one have doctrine without propositions?) Those in TGC who have affirmed this document ought to go back and read 2 *Timothy* 3:16 where the Apostle Paul wrote, “*All Scripture...is profitable for doctrine*” (emphasis added). Lest the writers appear completely heterodox, the paragraph once again claims that we can still gain knowledge of God’s will from Scripture even if it cannot be put into propositions. They write, “[I]t [the Scripture] conveys God’s will and mind to us....” Question: TGC leadership claims that the Bible contains propositions, but not all of it can be “distilled” into propositions (a statement irrational in and of itself); however, it can still communicate truth to us. How then is this subjective non-propositional truth that supposedly comes from God (objectively defined, though we don’t know by what or whom), communicated? Truth is a property of propositions, and cannot be communicated any other way.

But none of these statements is the fundamental problem with TGC’s view of Scripture. The main

cause of all these problematic statements is the fact that the theologians of TGC have deconstructed or more properly disregarded the true meaning of the word, “proposition.” *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* defines *proposition* as “A statement in which something is affirmed or denied, so that it can therefore be characterized as either true or false.” Or as Gordon Clark has stated, a proposition is “the meaning of a declarative sentence.”¹² This definition is not just the accepted definition of Christian believers, but for the last several thousand years has been the accepted definition among unbelieving scholars as well. In fact, it has only been in the last several decades as postmodernism has redefined the very meaning of language into a subjective cesspool of pure irrational nonsense that this definition has been rejected.

Compare this view of the proposition to the *TVM*’s: “But the truth of Scripture cannot be exhausted in a series of *propositions*. It exists in the *genres of narrative, metaphor, and poetry*, yet they convey God’s will and mind to us so as to change us into his likeness” (*TVM*, I.2, emphasis added). Notice carefully, that the “genres of narrative, metaphor, and poetry” are set against the concept of propositional communication as if to say that narrative, metaphor, and poetry are *not* propositional in nature. Not only is this a relatively new concept in Western philosophical thought (thanks to postmodernism), but more importantly it is an absurd and irrational definition of the “proposition.” The placement of the “proposition” in opposition to the “genres of narrative, metaphor and poetry” makes the final clause of the paragraph regarding how God’s Word is conveyed untenable because if such genres are not essentially propositional (even though each genre does not exclusively state facts, or logical conclusions based on facts, in a strict syllogistic manner), how can any objective meaning or communication be derived from the Scriptures. In short, if we have lost the objective meaning of language, how then can any person engage in an intelligent and rational

discussion about God, man, sin, Jesus Christ, and salvation, and most importantly, the Scriptures?

In *Luke* 24:25-27 and 44-45, Christ refers to the different genres or categories of the books of the Bible (poetry, writings, and the Law) as “Scripture” or to be more literal, as the “writings.” Though the Law, historical writings, prophecy, and poetry are different in genre, form, and style, Jesus describes all three forms as “written” statements about himself, and therefore, all three genres are propositional in nature. Thus from the very mouth of Jesus Christ himself, we see that the Scripture is propositional. Consider also *Matthew* 22:40, where Christ “distills” the Law and the Prophets into a single logically coherent proposition: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” Furthermore, Jesus’ own use of the Old Testament agrees with Paul’s statement in *2 Timothy* 3:16 that all Scripture “is profitable for doctrine,” and Paul’s own definition includes poetry, prophecy, history and the law. Therefore, according to Christ and the apostles, all forms of the written Scriptures contain doctrinal propositions that are man’s only source of knowing the one true God.

What then does the Bible say about the deviant doctrines within this new movement of postmodern Evangelicals called TGC? The Bible is quite clear regarding its supremacy, superiority, and authority in all matters of faith, doctrine, practice, worship, and government. Consider the clarity and the simplicity of the following Scripture passages in contrast to the vague and uncertain morass of TGC’s view of Scripture. David declares that “you [God] have magnified [or made great] *your word* above *your name*” (*Psalms* 138:2). Consider what God the Holy Spirit has said in this verse: God himself, the sovereign God of Heaven has elevated his Word *above* his very name! What does this mean? We must remember that the names of God in Scripture are more than just mere titles of identification, but are verbal expressions that describe and define the very character of God. Consider the name of God revealed in *Exodus* 3. God declared to Moses, “I AM” (3:14), the self-existing God, infinite, eternal, unchangeable, pure Spirit, sovereign, good, righteous, holy, true, beautiful in glory, immutable in character, and filled with everlasting love. God declares his name to be I

¹² Gordon H. Clark, *Logic*, (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2004), 28.

AM WHO I AM. This is God's name, and this is God's character. Scripture is filled with references to and descriptions of the majesty of God's great and holy character. The more we read the Scripture, the more we see there is no god like our God; there is no one who is greater than our God, and he is supreme above all. Consider then the full significance of the statement before us. God is speaking about his Word, and he says that *he himself* has *magnified* it *above* his own name. What is God placing higher than even his own name? The Holy Scripture, the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God! If this is God's own view of his Word, how much more then should we his people exalt it? But consider what else the Scripture says about itself.

Second Timothy 3:16: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God [literally, breathed-out by God himself], and is *profitable* for *doctrine*...." Here the Apostle Paul clearly declares that Scripture is not a book of human origins. All Scripture was literally breathed out by God, and therefore, comes directly from God. But how did God breathe out his Word in the manuscripts that Paul and the other authors of the Old and New Testament Scriptures wrote? Peter explains the exact method in his *Second Epistle*. He writes, "...for prophecy came not by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were *moved by the Holy Spirit*" (2 *Peter* 1:21). The last phrase of this verse could literally be translated as these men were "carried along by the wind" of the Holy Spirit or driven by the Holy Spirit as they wrote down the words that they wrote. The Greek word used here is the same Greek word used in *Acts* 27:15 to describe a ship being carried along or driven by the wind. Just as a ship is carried along or propelled by the wind (and by consequence, would not have power to move without the wind), so these holy men of God spoke, and later wrote, not by their own will or design. God the Holy Spirit like a wind moving them, propelling them forward, so caused them to write down the very words of God himself. And lest we should doubt that the words written were the very words of God, both the Old and New Testament Scriptures make clear that the words revealed are the *very words* of God:

"I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put *my words* in his mouth..." (*Deuteronomy* 18:18).

"I have put *my words* in your mouth" (*Isaiah* 51:16).

"...and *my words* which *I have put* in your mouth shall not depart from you your mouth..." (*Isaiah* 59:21).

"Behold, I have put *my words* in your mouth" (*Jeremiah* 1:9).

"For he whom God sent speaks the *words of God*..." (*John* 3:34).

"For I have given them the *words you have given me*" (*John* 17:8).

"I have given them *your word*" (*John* 17:14).

Notice the emphasis of God the Holy Spirit regarding the revelatory writings: All of them are regarded as the *words* of God. Not the thoughts of God, not the ideas of God, not the speculations of God, not even as the acts of God, but the *words*, the *propositions*, the *grammatical structures*, the *logical syllogisms* of God; in short, all that is written in these books are the very *words* of the living God. And thus Paul commands Timothy that he should "hold fast to the *pattern of sound words* which you have heard from me..." (2 *Timothy* 1:13). Both the Old and New Testaments declare with clarity, simplicity, and authority, that God has spoken. He has spoken by his Son and by the Spirit, and he has spoken in words—rational words, propositions—and he has revealed truth in this manner. The Gospel Coalition notwithstanding, this is the truth the church is to receive and be built upon.