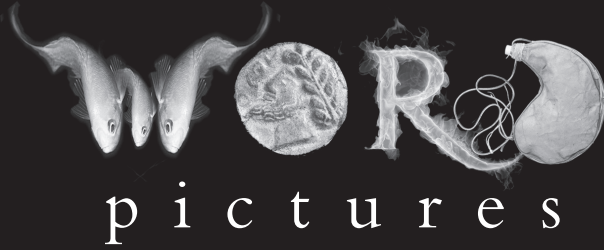


BRIAN GODAWA



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KNOWING GOD THROUGH

STORY & IMAGINATION



IVP Books

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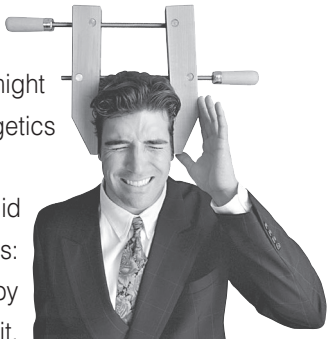
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## Confessions of a Modern

I love apologetics, philosophy and theology. I've pursued them for many years as a dominant focus in my Christian walk. From my first discovery of worldview thinking in the writings of Francis Schaeffer, through my hungry devouring of every book on defending the faith I could read, my Christianity has developed through the paradigm of apologetics, philosophy and theology.

I've learned a lot of biblical doctrine within the context of how it contradicts unbelieving cults and worldviews. I've come to understand the nature of the "faith once for all delivered to the saints" in terms of rational defense of its propositions. I've defined myself through systematic theology, which includes objections to false doctrines. One might even say I've been obsessed with apologetics and rational inquiry.

When I first sought a reasonable faith, I did the typical Evangelical thing in the 1980s: I read *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell and many other books like it.



I then embarked on a journey of attempting to memorize every archeological factoid that supported the Bible, every empirical verification of creation against chance and evolution, every rationalized harmony of every alleged contradiction in the Bible, every historical fulfillment of every prophecy, that I could. I even studied as many unbelieving world-views as I could in order to prove the rational superiority and truth of Christianity.

Needless to say, this Herculean task was exhausting. Like Atlas bearing the world, I shrugged. I thought that if I could just marshal enough facts, answer enough objections, master the arguments for the existence of God and show how rational Christianity was, then unbelievers would be forced into the position of “accepting” Christianity because it satisfied the modern canons of logic and science. If I met the standards of skepticism, the skeptic would simply *have to* change his mind because he followed logic and science “wherever it led him.”

Then I discovered original sin—or more precisely, the noetic (rational) effect of sin. I learned from the Bible that not only has all humankind inherited Adam’s curse of disobedience (Rom 5:12-14), but all unbelievers actually know about God and his essential nature but suppress that truth through their wickedness (Rom 1:18-21). As a result, even their reasoning is futile, their logic corrupted, their understanding darkened by willful ignorance (Eph 4:17-18). Every part of man—heart, soul, body *and* mind—is affected by sin.

Biblically, people are not unbelievers because they suffer the lack of reasons, historical verification or scientific proof to believe. They are unbelievers because they know the truth about God and suppress that knowledge sinfully. The problem with unbelievers is not ultimately rational, it is moral. As in the original case with Adam and Eve, sin distorts man’s reason as well as his will. The sinner uses sin-tainted reason (Eph 4:18) and empirical observations to rationalize a prejudice against God (Rom. 1:18); he does not use it to discover truth wherever it leads. As

Puritan John Owen put it in *The Holy Spirit*,

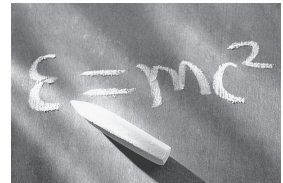
That Jesus Christ was crucified, is a proposition that any natural [i.e., unregenerate] man may understand and assent to, and be said to receive: and all the doctrines of the gospel may be taught in propositions and discourses, the sense and meaning of which a natural man may understand; but it is denied that he can receive the things themselves. For there is a wide difference between the mind's receiving doctrines notionally, and receiving the things taught in them really.<sup>1</sup>

The noetic effect of sin chastened my faith in the power of reason, but it did not destroy it.

## LOGIC AND REASON

In order to avoid apostasy, heresy and just bad theology, Scripture must be interpreted in context with other Scripture (Mt 4:5-7). The Bible may declare man's rational faculties as fallen, but that same Bible uses reason and logic all over the place. It's irrefutable.

I studied the Bible with this privileging of reason. I saw how Paul vigorously sought to "persuade" people to repent (Acts 18:4).<sup>2</sup> That means rational argumentation; the Greek word for "repent" literally means "change the mind" (Acts 17:30). I treasured the discovery that God exalts the search for knowledge and wisdom (Prov 1:7; cf. Prov 8:9-10; 9:10; Is 1:18), as well as philosophy rooted in Christ (Col 2:8). I even came to realize that God's own revelation expresses or assumes the primary logical laws of identity, antithesis and noncontradiction (Ex 3:14; 20:3, 16) so



<sup>1</sup>John Owen, quoted by James K. A. Smith in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), p. 227.

<sup>2</sup>See also Acts 19:26; 26:28; 28:23; 2 Cor 5:11.

often it's not even debatable. The apostle John calls God the *Logos*, a deliberate echo of the Greek notion of the underlying logical structure of the universe (Jn 1:1). Jesus used logic (Mt 21:24-27), and if it's good enough for Jesus . . .

So the question I struggled over was: How could the Bible be so equally explicit in its affirmation of reason as well as man's sinful corruption of reason? Wouldn't those two cancel each other out? Is the Bible contradicting itself? Or am I misunderstanding the big picture?

The reconciliation of this apparent tension has been attempted by Christians in different ways throughout history, but the bottom line for me is that the Bible teaches both, so we must affirm both or suffer infidelity to God's Word. What follows will show that getting to this bottom line will not be a non sequitur leap.

## PROPOSITIONAL TRUTH

In my pursuit of rational discourse I came to love propositions, especially logical ones. They seemed to be so clarifying, so neat and tidy, in my quest for discovery of truth and reality. A proposition can be defined as a statement that affirms or denies something and is either true or false. In an everyday sense, proposition can simply mean "verbal statement," but in a theological sense it refers to a form of communication of truth that stresses the way things really are—or the factual, objective reality of something. In this sense, a proposition is cognitive, discerned through the rational mind. A poem or a prayer is not propositional because it conveys subjective emotional expression rather than objective rational description. The phrase "God delivers his people" is a propositional statement, but the phrase "God deliver me," is an emotional cry for help.

Scripture contains propositional truth—a lot of it. Contrary to the claims of mysticism, God *can* be known truly and sufficiently through rational propositions; at least God seems to think so, since he used so

many propositions to communicate himself to human beings. God is eternal, immortal and invisible (1 Tim 1:17), God is love (1 Jn 4:8), God knows all things (1 Jn 3:20) and works all things after the counsel of his will (Eph 1:11) . . . These are just a few of the hundreds of propositional truths about God in the Bible. When King David, the prophet Isaiah and the apostle Paul argue the irrationality of idol worship, they make propositional claims and use logic as a means of proving their argument (Ps 115:1-8; Is 44:12-17; Acts 17:24, 29).

## BOOKS

I was persuaded that, unlike some Christian anti-intellectuals, God considers logic to be an important part of understanding him. I was delightfully enraptured to uncover the fact that books are important to God too. In both Old and New Testaments, God's people are shown to be, so to speak, "people of the book." Their spiritual connectedness to God is often linked to reading and obeying the *book* of God's Law (Neh 8; cf. Deut 30:8-10; 2 Chron 34:30). God enshrined his commands in a *book* that Moses placed in a holy location beside the Ark of the Covenant (Deut 31:26). Old and New Testament saints constantly appealed to "the book" of Scripture for verification of their truth claims (Acts 17:11; cf. Ps 40:7; Lk 4:16-21; Heb 10:7). When the apostle Paul defended his faith, he paraphrased Scripture *books* and quoted pagan *books* to point unbelievers to God (Acts 17). Noble-minded Christians compared Paul's teaching against *the book* (Acts 17:11). Indeed, the final form which God encoded his truth to us is in *books*, from Genesis to Revelation (Ex 24:4; Rev 1:11). Being a book-lover myself, I thought, *Me and God, we seem to have a lot in common.*



## WORDS

The more I read, the more I treasured words, since books are full of them. And words are central to the Christian faith as well. The Bible, God's revelation to us, is written in words. God created the universe and all there is using words; he spoke, and it was (Gen 1; Ps 33:6; Heb 11:3). There are literally thousands of examples in Scripture where God uses spoken words to make his point to pagans or his people. In fact, "Thus says the Lord" occurs over four hundred times in Scripture. He chose to use *words* to speak to his prophets and apostles, thus legitimating words as sufficient vehicles for ultimate truth.

The existentialist theory that language is inadequate for true communication or connection between persons is simply not biblical. After creating the universe with words (Gen 1), God created man *in his image* (Gen 1:26-27) then immediately *spoke* to Adam (Gen 1:28-30). He then warned him, *using words*, regarding the danger of disobedience (Gen 2:16-17). Adam's first recorded activity is his verbally *naming* the animals (Gen 2:19), an expression of his authority, reflecting God naming elements of the created order (Gen 1:5, 8, 10).

Children of God grow in their relationship with God through meditation on his *words* (Ps 1), treasuring those *words* in their hearts (Ps 119:11) and reading those *words* (Neh 8). The gospel is typically proclaimed, in the Bible, through verbal preaching of *words* (Rom 10:8-17)<sup>3</sup> and very often defended by *words* (e.g., 1 Pet 3:15; Acts 17).

So part of my responsibility in mirroring God's image, glorifying him and proclaiming and defending the gospel is to be rational, use propositions, read books and use words. So far, so good. But something went wrong.

## LOGOCENTRISM

Over the years, as I pursued an emphasis on rational discourse almost

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<sup>3</sup>See also Is 52:7; Acts 8:12; 13:32; Rom 10:15.

exclusively in my spiritual walk. I noticed in myself a tendency toward reducing everything to logical debate. I became argumentative. Encounters with unbelievers and even believers would seem to always end in cognitive dispute.

And I became impatient. With such a heavy focus on studying logical and historical argumentation, one becomes acutely aware of just how illogical and historically uneducated so many people really are. Most people's beliefs—and their defense of those beliefs—are so riddled with logical fallacies that it boggles the mind. Or rather, it *frustrates* the mind. Some of the more astute Christian philosophers I studied taught me to think about the nature of argumentation itself, as well as worldviews. The philosophical presuppositions that everyone operates under are so often unexamined that when you do bring them to light, they prove devastating to such unreflective viewpoints.



I became impatient with people who parroted received prejudices, actually arguing that Christianity is superstitious while putting their faith in the fictional fantasy of *The Da Vinci Code*! So I would engage in rigorous debate with the unenlightened and proceed to destroy unbelieving worldviews like they were going out of style. It was like a genocide of unbelief. “So, you’re a naturalist? Well, if you believe everything has a natural cause, then your own thoughts are caused by nature, which means your truth claim of naturalism is self-refuting.” WHAM!

“So, you’re a relativist? Well, if you believe there are no absolutes, then that is an absolute, and you’re relativism is self-refuting.” WHAM!

“So, you’re a monist? Well, if you believe all is one, and that distinctions between things are illusion, then you cannot disagree with me without making a distinction between your truth claims and my truth claims.

Your monism is self-refuting.” WHAM!

I felt like the Muhammad Ali of apologetics: Trample like an elephant, sting like a hive of killer bees. But I eventually learned that winning an argument is not always the same as persuasion; you can win the battle of debate but lose the war for a soul.

I started to sense that my approach to apologetics and theology was becoming dehumanizing. I was treating the human being before me as a mere carrier of a set of irrational beliefs that it was my purpose to dismantle into absurdity—all in the cause of “leading every thought captive to Christ.” As much as I would claim that the Bible was my ultimate authority, I would be more focused on logical discourse and rational inquiry than on truth in its fullness of manifestation in the *person* of Jesus Christ. I lost sight of the fact that Truth is ultimately an *incarnate person*, not solely abstract reasoning (Jn 14:6). Reason, not God, was my ultimate arbiter.

I was now what I call a “mind-oriented Christian.” I tended to reduce other Christians to their doctrinal commitments, judging their status before God based on my credal scorecard. “Well, you did okay, eight out

of ten doctrines correct, but those two wrong ones set you back on the hierarchy of doctrinal knowledge. I guess I will tolerate you.” Through an inordinate emphasis in my faith on logic, rational discourse, words and books, I had transformed my Christian faith into a rationalistic philosophy lacking personal relationship and



*The Good Samaritan*, by  
Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

imagination. I thought mere theologically correct belief about reality was the same thing as inhabiting that reality. Emotions were irrational and thus irrelevant, because as all good logicians know, the appeal to pity (emotion) is an informal logical fallacy, and emotions cannot be trusted. Never mind that Jesus appealed to pity to persuade people (see Lk 10:29-37). Never mind that the Bible presents our emotions as a legitimate part of relating to God (see Mt 9:13; 22:37). Never mind that God appeals to pity throughout the Scriptures (Jon 4:10-11),<sup>4</sup> not to mention God's own emotional outbursts of jealousy (Deut 4:24), anger (1 Chron 13:11), bitter weeping and moaning (Jer 48:31-32; Jn 11:35; Lk 19:41), compassion (Lk 15:20), grief (Gen 6:6) and shouts of joy (Zeph 3:17).<sup>5</sup>



*Christ Driving the Merchants from the Temple,*  
by Albrecht Dürer

<sup>4</sup>See also Zech 7:9-10; Prov 22:21-25; Rom 12:20; Mt 9:13.

<sup>5</sup>Modernist Christians argue that such emotional expressions of God are mere anthropomorphisms (human traits applied to God by way of analogy), as if such scientific categorizing negates rather than reinforces their emotional content. This is a non sequitur. Of course God is transcendent and we cannot understand him fully. Of course God does not experience emotions *in the same exact* way that finite, sinful humanity does. But he experiences emotion nonetheless, and he uses those human traits and metaphors, laden with human emotion, as legitimate means of understanding him. If one argues that such anthropomor-

I began to discover just what was lopsiding my Christianity and my communication. It was my devaluation of imagination. I had become *logocentric*. I had privileged rational discourse as the ultimate means of discerning truth and neglected the legitimacy of emotion and imagination in understanding God. Reason had become a sort of idol to me. And it was not well with my soul.

It was like a war between word and image in my theology, and I had for all these years considered *word* as the good side and *image* as the bad side—or at least the suspicious side. I needed to relearn a biblical truth: we are not disembodied intellects, we are enfleshed spirit that includes intellect but is not reducible to it. Our faith is not merely an abstract philosophy or mental assent to doctrinal propositions, it is first and foremost a covenanted relationship with the *person* of God.

## WORD VERSUS IMAGE

When I refer to *word* and *image*, I do not mean merely literal things, as in the words you are reading versus visual pictures you see. If we think of word and image as categories of discourse, the category of *word* might include words, propositions, books, spoken and written prose, preaching and rational discourse, among other things. The category of *image* likewise involves more than mere visual image. The word *image* is a root word for *imagination*, which scholar William Dyrness defines traditionally as “the ability to shape mental images of things not present to the senses.”<sup>6</sup> So the category of *image* might include anything that

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phisms of emotion are not really emotion, then one would have to be consistent in saying that all anthropomorphisms of God are not really what they claim to be, such as justice, compassion, care or love. All these human metaphors of God involve intense emotion that is intrinsically a part of their image. If God did not want us to understand him as having emotions, he would not have used so many emotional terms and metaphors of himself. If emotions are a part of the *imago Dei* in us, then the appeal to emotion may be logically invalid, but it is biblically valid.

<sup>6</sup>William A. Dyrness, *Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 4.

engages the imagination rather than the rational intellect. This would include visual images, music, drama, symbol, story, metaphor, allegory and other forms of creativity.



An example of the difference between these categories of word and image would be systematic doctrines versus theological parables and metaphors; describing God as a rock and fortress may involve the use of words, but it accesses the imagination rather than logical deduction or scientific observation. As Kevin Vanhoozer explains, “The association of ideas in a metaphorical statement is the result neither of induction nor deduction; neither scientific observation nor logical reasoning create metaphors. Indeed, metaphor subverts logic; it has been called an ‘intentional category mistake.’”<sup>7</sup>

Traditionally, *word* has been considered more intellectual and *image*, more emotional. *Word* has been linked with abstract communication, *image* with concrete communication. If *word* is more cerebral, *image* is more sensate. The writers of the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* define image as

any word that names a concrete thing (such as *tree* or *house*) or action (such as *running* or *threshing*). Any object or action that we can picture is an image. Images require two activities from us as readers of the Bible. The first is to experience the image as literally and in as fully a sensory way as possible.<sup>8</sup>

Though imagery in the Bible is communicated through words, the usage of words is evocative, not of abstract eternal truths of reason, but

<sup>7</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 129.

<sup>8</sup>“Introduction: Defining Terms: Image, Symbol, Metaphor, Simile,” *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, in *The Essential IVP Reference Collection CD-ROM* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

of a world of image, symbol, metaphor, simile, and story. As the editors of this dictionary conclude, “the Bible is much more a book of images and motifs than of abstractions and propositions.”

This traditional dichotomy between word and image is better described as a dialectical tension between *reason and imagination*. I will point out later in the book that images can be just as abstract as words, and words just as emotional as images. The real question regarding the comprehension and communication of truth, then, is not “Are words superior to images?” but “Is reason superior to imagination?”

Over the years this dichotomy between rationality and imagination has been reflected in the broader Christian culture. Some Christians have tended to be so word-oriented that they border on rationalism and distrust the use of imagination, deeming it an idol tool of the devil’s workshop. Meanwhile, other Christians have tended to be image-oriented, with a more experiential approach to their faith and a distrust of dogmatic reasoning as close-minded bigotry.

A look at table 1 charts out how this word-image dichotomy has created a division in the body of Christ.

**Table 1**

<b>BIASES</b>	<b>WORD</b>	<b>IMAGE</b>
Locale	Traditional Church	Contemporary Church
Era	Modernity	Postmodernity
Emphasis	Doctrine	Relationship
Basis	Reason	Experience
Mandate	Preach the Gospel	Live the Gospel
Priority	Content of Message	Style and Form
Communication	Proposition	Story
Pursuit	Truth	Spirit
Values	Rules	Freedom
Temperament	Rationality	Creativity
Reference	Books, speech	Film, TV, Pop Culture
Vulnerability	Dead Orthodoxy	Anti-Intellectualism
Risks	Legalism	License

Theologically, I located myself on the “word” side of the chart. I sought to understand where this split came from and how it had affected me, and I began to see that my Christianity had been unknowingly affected by the paradigm of *modernity*, whose origin is most often attributed to the eighteenth-century movement called the Enlightenment.