

“RECEIVED” LAWS OF LANGUAGE: THE EXISTENCE, GROUND, AND PRELIMINARY IDENTIFICATION OF A HERMENEUTICALLY DISPUTED NOTION

by

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Introduction and Preliminary Thesis

A few years ago, a colleague alerted me to the humorous rumor that I had formally denied the existence of natural revelation. I found the rumor bizarre—a notion akin to denying the existence of air or water. Reflecting further, I suspect that the anonymous perpetrator of this rumor misunderstood my concerns about the more objectionable notion of natural *theology*. Natural theology, in its most aggressive expression, supposes that mankind may derive and construct a whole system of warranted belief apart from the seminal embrace of the Christian God and the Christian Scriptures. Obstacles to accepting this idea are manifold, but reduce principally to two: (1) the insufficiency of natural revelation and (2) the fallenness of humanity. These two hurdles give substance to the biblical claim that apart from the fear of the Lord there is no true knowledge to be had (Prov 1:7).

Despite these hurdles, however, it has been rightly observed that fallen man is capable not only of obtaining, but also of comprehending, processing, and correlating data in the natural realm, leading to a great many correct conclusions greater than the sum of his observations. Apart from the Christian Scriptures, surely, fallen man knows much of God, his world, and his ways. What fallen man lacks, however, is a comprehensive truth system or truth standard by which his knowledge may be regarded as coherent, warranted, and thus as true.² He ever

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²To cite Cornelius Van Til, “They of whom Scripture says that their minds are darkened can yet discover much truth” (*Christian Theory of Knowledge* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1969], 44). What they lack, he observes, is warrant. As such, the elusive notion of *certainty* (truth *qua* truth) is unavailable to unbelievers “by their own criteria.” Only by a regenerate fear of the Living God as revealed in the special revelation of the Christian Scriptures may a man assign certainty to what is known by natural revelation (Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word*, a Symposium by Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, 3rd rev. ed.

“exchanges the truth of God for a lie” for “hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world” (Rom 1:24; Col 2:8).³ As such, to turn a biblical phrase, the unbeliever may “have a form of truth, but deny the power thereof” (2 Tim 3:5; cf. Rom 2:20). As such, he can never construct a credible and coherent, much less a comprehensive natural theology.

But what of the notion—sandwiched vulnerably between the two ideas of natural *revelation* and natural *theology*—of natural *law*? By natural law is meant that, imbedded in the natural order, are principles generally available to mankind, whereby the whole universe necessarily operates. Unlike natural revelation (which is ours by sensory perception) and natural theology (which, to the degree that we have it, is ours through logical deduction), these foundational laws of ontology, epistemology/logic, axiology, and so forth, are non-inferential: they precede human observation and deduction in such a way as to render these exercises both coherent and utile.

The anti-theist insists that these “laws” are nothing more than sociological conventions upon which users have agreed, but the likelihood of this is very low. Scripture assumes the transcendence of such laws by its unqualified use of them;⁴ further, (1) universal acceptance, (2) the relative absence of competing conventions, and (3) the eventual failure of all competing conventions all point to transcendence. These natural laws are “received,” not inferred/deduced.

The manner by which these laws are received is disputed. The Cartesian affirms that we submit to them rationally with neutral/objective minds little different from God’s. Others (including philosophers as diverse as Thomas Reid and Immanuel Kant) suggest that the knowledge of these laws or “categories” is empirical/existential—we become experimentally, even mystically aware of our noumenal pre-programming as our minds mature. Both approaches, however, find the human subject natively adequate to comprehending God and God’s world apart from God’s words. VanTilian presuppositionalism offers a third alternative, viz., that these principles are *recognized* by virtue of our status as image-bearers and analogs of God: we instantly acknowledge what we already know to be true by prior acquaintance with our Father.⁵ God as Creator has plainly revealed himself, and his

(Philadelphia: P&R, 1946), 263–301, esp. 281–83; cf. also Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998], 195–98).

³Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this article are drawn from the NIV, 1984 ed.

⁴God began speaking to Adam and Adam understood God’s words—there was no “learning curve” with respect to Adam’s mature use of language.

⁵Greg Bahnsen illustrates three ways of knowing with the everyday practice of retrieving an arriving passenger at the airport. A chauffeur may identify his object in one of three ways: (1) inductively (e.g., by physical description, clothes, nametags, etc.), (2) mystically (i.e., by incising his object’s identity by ineffable means), or, most commonly and to the point being made, (3) *recognitively* (i.e., by remembering a

creatures recognize him immediately—all intellectually mature persons know that the universe is the handiwork of the Christian God and, furthermore, that the laws of logic, language, ethics, and so forth could not be other than what he has established. God has revealed himself to his image-bearers, and even the very most depraved of them cannot deny it. And while depraved humanity will never embrace God as God, neither can mankind wholly set aside the instrumental means God has used to transmit his revelation. God is necessarily there and cannot be shrugged off.⁶

Much of the current conversation on natural law clusters around the question of *moral* first principles, or, to cite the Apostle Paul, that ethical code possessed by those who “do not have the [written] law,” yet manifest a “law of themselves,” the requirements of which are “written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (Rom 2:14–15). We deduce from this passage that there is stamped on the souls of all divine image-bearers an ethical capacity, and more, a sense of ethical suasion concerning God’s moral expectations (1:32). This ethical suasion is not independently inferred but universally shared by all image-bearers. But humans do more than simply share common ethical impulses. In the same context we discover that mankind’s ethical impulses subdivide into sub-categorical impulses: certain ethical aberrations are “natural” and others are “unnatural” (1:26). This implies that natural law expands beyond a basic capacity for morality to include shared capacities for *rationality* and even *teleology*.⁷ And so grows the corpus of natural law far beyond our most primitive ethical impulses.

The present article argues that image-bearers not only have shared notions of being (ontics), knowledge (epistemics), oughtness (ethics),

person with whom he has prior acquaintance). It is by the last of these methods, Bahnsen opines, that unbelievers “know” God and his ways in the Pauline sense intended in Romans 1:19, 21, 32; 2:2, 14, 15 (see his lecture 21, “Natural Theology and Theistic Proofs,” in “A Seminary Level Course in Apologetics,” DVD series of course delivered in Brooklyn, NY [Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Foundation, n.d.]).

⁶“The prodigal son can never forget the father’s voice. It is an albatross forever around his neck” (Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 275). Bahnsen, likewise: “God does not mumble. Men have been made to *recognize His voice*. . . . God has so created men that, as it were, they are ‘conditioned’ to see and understand his signature throughout the created world. The evidence is directly apprehended, and is persuasive—leaving men without any excuse” (*Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, 200, emphasis added, but see his whole discussion on 192–219).

⁷Whether we determine homosexuality to be “unnatural” by (1) biological deduction (i.e., observing that the physical instruments of the homosexual union are incompatible) or (2) as a matter of civic purpose (i.e., observing that the principal goal of sexuality—producing children and perpetuating the whole human race—is not served by homosexual union) is much debated. At a minimum, Paul assumes naturally shared capacities/principles of basic deduction; more than this, I would hazard he is suggesting basic teleological assumptions as well: a recognition of the end for which God has made mankind.

deduction (reason), and intention (purpose), but also the capacities to choose (volition) and worship (spirituality).⁸ Specific to this article is the proposal that all persons in God's image necessarily also share common notions of linguistics that allow them successfully to receive divine revelation, codify their thoughts, and communicate propositionally with God and other image-bearers. The "laws" basic to linguistic function, as with all of the functions above, subsist "naturally" in all persons, according to the Christian system, by virtue of their status as analogs of God. And since the source of these received laws is divine, they are necessarily both shared and fixed: we cannot emend them.

Qualifications to the Thesis

The ideas of shared laws of language and especially of received laws of language are not novel ideas and certainly are not unique to dispensationalism. Modern philology has, however, rejected the notions—so thoroughly, in fact, that even dispensational embrace of the ideas is rare.⁹ Some of this reticence is principled, but some rests on misunderstanding of "laws of language." Clarification is in order.

The Limitations of Natural Law

Arguing that the source of all natural law is God himself and thus impervious to emendation flows inevitably from the immutability of God. This idea must not, however, be overstated. By it I do not mean,

⁸How many such "spheres" exist may be debated endlessly. Rolland McCune, whose contribution to this article will soon be divulged, identified eight such spheres: spirituality, life, intelligence, purpose, action, freedom, self-consciousness, and emotion (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008–2010], 1:190–201). Dr. McCune personally informed me that he did not intend these categories to constitute a comprehensive list, and commended my addition of *morality* and *linguistics* to this list when I first taught systematic theology at Detroit Baptist Seminary under his mentorship.

⁹Ken Gentry observes that, "subsequent to Ludwig Wittgenstein's studies in linguistic analysis, there is no general agreement among philosophers regarding the 'laws' of language or the proper philosophy of language" ("The Ninety-Five Theses Against Dispensationalism," no. 35, available at <http://againstdispensationalism.com/95-theses-2/>). Curtis Crenshaw and Grover Gunn, III go further, suggesting that "today's contemporary philosophers would smile—if not split their sides over such an assumed agreement" (*Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* [Memphis: Footstool, 1985], 11). They are not wrong.

A Google search of the phrase "received laws of language" yields only 48 unique results, most of which are citations of nineteenth-century writers, notably J. P. Lange and George N. H. Peters. Of the remaining fifteen, seven reference McCune. Lange's lines on the topic are especially notable:

The literalist (so called) is not one who denies that figurative language, that symbols, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great spiritual truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be normally interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded (*Commentary on the Holy Scripture: Revelation* [New York: Charles Scribners, 1872], 98).

firstly, that all of the rules that govern the functional “spheres” iterated above are immediately revealed in all of their specificity. Christ himself learned obedience by exposure to the written Word (Luke 2:52; Heb 5:8), and his capacity to discern good and evil was incubated in the crucible of experience (Heb 5:14). Nor do I mean, **secondly**, that humans, in their depravity, cannot suppress what is incontrovertibly theirs by nature (Rom 1:18): they sear their consciences (1 Tim 4:2), reprogramming them (Rom 1:25 and 14:14–23, in principle) so severely that they begin to believe good to be evil and evil to be good (Isa 5:20, etc.). Nor do I mean, **thirdly**, that specific applications of God’s transcendent laws may not change in specific historical contexts. As is God’s regular theocratic pattern, there are *elements* and *circumstances* of the divine rule, the former which are fixed, the latter which are unique to the peculiar administrations of God’s whole government.¹⁰ **Fourthly**, I do not deny that God has granted to collective humanity the extraordinary privilege of supplementing God’s laws with additional ones—laws that, amazingly, are equally as binding on humanity as are God’s own laws (Gen 9:6, etc.). What I mean instead by the “impossibility of emendation” is that the primitive noumenal programming with which all persons are born is necessarily shared and that no person or culture can wholly erase what God has imprinted on their very souls. Were this restraint to disappear, the results would be swift and catastrophic. The divine laws by which God reveals himself to us and acts among us are as necessary as God himself.

Specific to the matter of received laws of language, then, I clarify that, by presupposing fixed principles of language by which all image-bearers necessarily communicate, I am not suggesting (1) that every grammatical/syntactical rule of each language is instinctively known in all its specificity, (2) that languages are impervious to evolution, or (3) that humans may not invent new syntactical forms, new genres with specialized rules of interpretation, or even entirely new languages. I am suggesting, instead, that human language is a resolutely *foundational* phenomenon. Foundationalism, by definition, is the “view that knowledge and epistemic (knowledge-relevant) justification have a two-tier structure: some instances of knowledge and justification are non-inferential, or foundational; and all other instances thereof are inferential, or non-foundational, in that they derive ultimately from foundational knowledge or justification.”¹¹ Language in its most embryonic form is a science that operates on a set of laws that are from without: rules that simply are and must be. This does not mean that the specific

¹⁰The distinction between elements and circumstances is most frequently made with respect to divinely ordered worship, wherein God establishes immutable features of ecclesiastical worship, but allows a measure of flexibility in their specific expression. I would extend this model, in principle, to every theocratic sphere.

¹¹*The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), s.v. “Foundationalism,” by Paul K. Moser, 276. Van-Tilian Presuppositionalism is a subset of this approach.

structures, words, genres, etc., of a given language may not evolve—they do so constantly and rapidly—but in their evolution there are boundaries that cannot be passed without forfeiting the intelligibility of language entirely. God sets a boundary on linguistic development and says, as it were, “This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt” (Job 38:11).

The Testimony of Secular Philology

Acceptance of inalienable linguistic laws is an ancient one. Plato was fascinated by the idea of philology and dedicated one of his works (*Cratylus*) to the topic. Plato is representative of the distinction established above in our definition of *foundationalism*. For Plato, the assignment of words, spellings, pronunciations, syntax, and the like, are the legacy of dialectic “legislators,” who by force of their literary or oratory eminence gather a following for their linguistic conventions. Words do not obtain their meaning by divine assignment, but by arbitrary human convention, principally (though variously informed by onomatopoeia).¹² The result is almost infinite variety and development in language. This variety does not mean, however, that there are no governing laws of language. Like much of nature, language operates according to the principle of the one and the many, and Plato brings *Cratylus* to a close with this necessary verity. Whether or not words and syntactical forms are assigned according to onomatopoeia or convention, by the gods or by human legislators, Plato was certain of one thing: the meaning of words in any given context is not in a state of “flux”—words, once used, never mean “first this and then that,” because words, in order to be a thing must also stay that thing. If, “when an observer approaches, [words/meaning] become other and of another nature,” then they “have no state”¹³ and knowledge and communication cease to be possible:

When the change occurs there will be no knowledge, and if the transition is always going on, there will always be no knowledge, and, according to that view, there will be no one to know and nothing to be known. But if that which knows and that which is known exist ever, and the beautiful and the good and every other thing also exist, then I do not think that they can resemble a process or flux, as we were just now supposing.¹⁴

Plato declined to identify the source of this linguistic stability; it simply

¹²Unlike the present article, Plato rejected the proposal of *Deus ex machina* as the primitive basis of language. There is no first language of “correct” words assigned by God/the gods. God is not the reason for words, but an excuse for not having a reason for words (which he goes on to supply).

¹³Plato *Cratylus* 439.d–440.a. Translation from *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series 71 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961).

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 440.b.

must be true in order for knowledge and communication to occur: the laws of language are transcendental.

Plato’s approach to language effectively held sway in secular philology for two millennia, and was not deposed until the waning years of the Modern Period.¹⁵ Max Müller’s account of changes in the science of philology is a fascinating one. Müller, a *classical* philologist, argued that “the science of language is one of the physical sciences, and therefore its method ought to be the same as that which has been followed by so much success in botany, geology, anatomy, and other branches of the study of nature.”¹⁶ However, as the nineteenth century progressed (with its growing appropriation of human evolution), philology was reclassified not as a *physical* science (one that “deals with the works of God”) but as a *historical* science (one that deals “with the works of man”), as reflected in its new label, *comparative* philology.¹⁷ The new discipline did not immediately stop proposing laws of language (indeed, the 1880s may be the high water mark for the proliferation of linguistic “laws”), but by cutting off all external factors (whether God or, at the very minimum, Platonic “ideas”), it was only a matter of time before the science of philology slipped into the maw of non-foundationalist post-modernism. Wittgenstein, cited above, drove the last nails into the coffin of the “laws of language” in modern philology. Müller, an acknowledger of God and a devotee of Kant, offered a way back to Plato’s transcendental and foundational approach. It was a way taken by very few in his train.

The Demonstration of Linguistic Laws

The notion that received laws are assumed prior to human utility does not deny the possibility of their demonstration. Such demonstrations do not make the laws true, *per se*, but they do offer a kind of *a posteriori* support for *a priori* assumptions.¹⁸ But what should we do

¹⁵The exception to this pattern was not in the secular but the religious realm—Jewish Kabbalah, with its literal, allusive, allegorical, and mystical senses and early Christianity with its literal, allegorical/typological, tropological/moral, and anagogical/eschatological senses of sacred Scripture. Reasons for the development of these senses of Scripture is sharply debated. Most often the approach seems to be an attempt, rooted in mysticism, to establish harmony between competing religious traditions (Jew/Greek, disparate schools of Jewish thought, Judaism/Christianity, etc.) or to harmonize Scripture with established theological traditions too entrenched to alter. It is beyond the purview of this essay to further explore this matter.

¹⁶*Lectures on the Science of Language* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1862), 20.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 21. I have long maintained that the greatest casualty of the theory of human evolution—and there are many (inerrancy, representative headship, human solidarity, the origin of sin/death, to name a few)—is the loss of the idea of language as received from God, and its replacement with the idea of language as invented by man. If the latter is true, then there is nothing that prevents languages from evolving to the point of total incoherence or utter incomprehensibility.

¹⁸In J. Gresham Machen’s homey words, demonstrations of presuppositional truth can “help God’s little ones.”

when those assumptions do not square neatly with the evidence? Some foundationalists (Moser calls them “modest” foundationalists) suggest that natural laws received transcendentally are *defeasible*, that is, they “can be defeated, undermined, or overridden by a certain sort of expansion of one’s evidence or justified beliefs.”¹⁹ In biblical hermeneutics, this approach grants to exegetes the authority to establish the laws of language discursively: one learns how to read the Bible by observing how later Scripture writers and the earliest Church Fathers read the Bible. The methods they ostensibly used, irrespective of the failure of these methods to sustain linguistic intelligibility generally or to survive the rigors of ordinary communication, are the methods we must use to read the Bible.

The “radical” foundationalist (among whom this author finds himself numbered) demurs, insisting that when one’s linguistic presuppositions are threatened by “evidence,” he should not immediately forsake his presuppositions, but rather reexamine the strength of the “evidence” and explore alternate interpretations that harmonize interpretive anomalies within the boundaries of his transcendentals. The stance of the “radical” foundationalist seems shocking, but in reality, we do this all the time:

- Were an engineer to attend a magic show, for instance, and watch a clever showman suspend (apparently) the laws of physics, we would not be shocked by or critical of the engineer were he to double down on the laws of physics and explore other interpretations of the “evidence.” We would not be bothered, even, were he to say, “I cannot explain how the magician performed his trick, but I remain confident that the laws of physics remain secure.” We would rather agree with his “radically foundationalist” stance.
- The “radically foundationalist” systematic theologian argues similarly. He may be forced to admit that he cannot harmonize, say, the problem of evil with the goodness of God or the anomalies of the fossil record with God as a recent Creator. But admitting uncertainty with respect to the problems of fossils and evil does not topple his settled belief in God’s character or in the historical reliability of the Christian Scriptures: these are *presuppositional* to his worldview. He will instead busy himself seeking additional evidence and constructing theological models to explain the apparent contradictions.²⁰ But his success in these efforts is irrelevant, because warrant for believing in the Christian God who has revealed himself inerrantly in the Christian Scriptures does not spring from external evidence. Our theologian is to be commended, not condemned for his confidence in God and his Word.
- The same approach holds for intertextual antinomies. When a

¹⁹Moser, “Foundationalism,” 277.

²⁰This impulse, I would suggest, offers nearly the whole rationale for the scores of “multiple views” books that crowd the evangelical publishing market.

“radical foundationalist” commentator, say, encounters the apparent contradiction of Paul and James regarding works and justification, he does not abandon inerrancy, forsake *sola fide*, pit Paul against James, or glibly appeal to “mystery.” Rather, he considers alternate interpretations that reconcile the exegetical “evidence” with what he knows absolutely to be true of the Christian system.

- It is my suggestion that apparent violations of the received laws of language, say, in the NT interpretation of the OT (or, even more unconvincingly, various “premodern” interpretations of the Bible by the early Church) should likewise not lead us to the hasty abandonment of the received laws of language—even though we have no chapter and verse to commend them. Instead, we should inquire first whether the supposed “violations” of the received laws are as credible as they seem at first blush. This may seem a shocking approach, but it is one in which we all engage at some level—and rightly so.

The reader is correct in observing, however, that these four examples are unequal. All four assumptions in view are sturdy ones, but not all are unassailable. My confidence in the laws of Newtonian physics is not so strong as my confidence in the existence of God and the inerrancy of the Bible. So what makes one *a priori* stronger than another? Are there any proposed *a priori* that can boast unassailability? And if so, what is that ingredient that renders it so?

The Only Valid Proof of Linguistic Laws

It is the final argument of this introduction that the only unassailable argument for immaterial laws (e.g., laws of language and logic) is a *transcendental* one. A transcendental argument, explains Greg Bahnsen, is one that “begins with *any* item of experience or belief whatsoever and proceeds, by critical analysis, to ask what conditions (or what other beliefs) would need to be true in order for that original experience or belief to make sense, be meaningful, or be intelligible to us.”²¹ The most common use of transcendental argumentation historically has been in demonstration of the existence of the Christian God.²² Simply put, apart from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has revealed himself inerrantly in the Christian Scriptures, nothing else can be known intelligibly (Prov 1:7); in fact, nothing else can even exist.

But imbedded in this statement are other subsidiary and equally necessary implications, viz., that God has revealed himself according to laws of language and logic, sourced in his nature and character and shared with his image-bearers, whereby we may know the God who is. We do this by reading his inerrant revelation and observing its internal

²¹*Van Til's Apologetic*, 502.

²²Immanuel Kant's *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763) is one of the earliest formal introductions to transcendental argument, though the approach, in truth, is as old as humanity.

coherence and its *correspondence* to all that God is and does.²³ The “rules” by which we read and ruminate are nowhere stated in Scripture, but the Scriptures assume them. God began speaking to Adam and Eve without detailing the linguistic laws by which they might understand his words; likewise, God’s appointed scribes began writing without explanation. Yet somehow, just as Adam found God’s words intelligible, so too have God’s image-bearers ever since. Further, we instinctively converse with these selfsame rules in interpersonal conversation; indeed, you and I, the writer and reader of this article, are using these ancient laws even now.²⁴ They are preconditions of intelligible discourse, and thus appropriately labeled *transcendental*.

But what *specifically* are those linguistic principles that prevent languages from de-evolving to the point of absurdity? This is, I would argue, the great unanswered question of natural law generally. How can people know with certainty that they have successfully identified laws written on their very hearts? The answer is not easy, because any proposed mechanism for knowing our own hearts is immediately injured by the relentless problem, wrought by depravity, that our hearts are deceitful above all (Jer 17:9). We are inevitably self-deceived about what we have received. As a result, the most conservative theologians tend to conclude that while “natural laws” may exist and may even offer some general stability to the world order, the practical value of natural laws for Christian theology is limited strictly to what may be corroborated *explicitly* in the Christian Scriptures. In short, specific special revelation is the only valid warrant for natural law.

This position is a safe one that protects mightily against the encroachment of communitarian consensus and individual autonomy as the default arbiters of natural law. And so it is with great trembling that I hazard any doubt. Still, it seems that the Scriptures may also supply *implicit* corroboration of natural laws for which no proof text may be supplied. The Bible does not, for instance, explicitly state the law of gravity, but the Mosaic stipulation of “parapets” on rooftops (Deut 22:8) implies its verity; the Bible does not explicitly define the law of non-contradiction, but implies that all can recognize instinctively that Christ cannot be both God and not-God (Matt 12:25ff). In short, warrant for these laws is not divine *expression* of these laws, but divine *employment* of these laws as utilities necessary to a coherent and holistic Christian worldview.²⁵

²³With Van Til, I see the validity of any proposed truth system as resting principally on the grounds of correspondence and coherence: (1) Does it correspond at every point with what God is/says/does, and (2) does each of its parts agree internally with the whole (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, n.d.], 2–3).

²⁴This is what McCune means below by his use of the term *axiomatic*: the laws of language that he proposes must be assumed true in order to be disproven. No alternative can be proposed coherently and meaningfully without using words that follow these rules.

²⁵Presuppositional apologetics is often criticized for offering strictly circular

My conclusion with respect to this article is that we may identify the basic-most laws of language not so much by explicit biblical statement, but by identifying the transcendental assumptions that necessarily attend God’s own use of language. As such, the following is not an attempt to examine how the Scripture writers interpreted other Scriptures (though we would expect them to do so faithfully), much less how the earliest Christians interpreted Scripture (which may or may not have been carried out with faithfulness). Rather, it seeks to establish rudimentary principles of language that sustain the very fabric of linguistic enterprise, and which, when ignored, render communication impossible.

It is with this introduction that I offer to our readers a project completed years ago, but only obscurely published, by my mentor, Dr. Rolland McCune. In it he identified four crucial “received laws of language” that establish, define, and commend biblical literalism as the most defensible approach to reading the Bible.²⁶ In the past 20 years I have received more requests (by far) for this article than for any other of Dr. McCune’s unpublished materials. It is my pleasure to offer to our readers his proposal of four “received” laws of language, without commentary or updating:

The Univocal Nature of Language

The univocal nature of language means that language speaks with “one voice.” Words can only mean one thing or have one signification in one and the same connection. Words can have but one meaning, or one set of propositional, cognitive values, in any given place; they cannot have two or more meanings in the same usage. A word may have a wide semantic range (different meanings at the time of writing), but it can only signify one thing in any one instance. Without this, language is incapable of communicating anything and simply becomes gibberish and gobbledygook. That language is univocal is axiomatic; it must be assumed to be true in order to disprove it as being true. To deny it is self-defeating, illogical, and irrational. The only exception is the unique and

arguments that operate on the basis of bare assertion (i.e., “The Bible is true because it says so”). As such, it is reasoned, its argument is no better than a Muslim arguing that “The Qur’an is true because the Qur’an says so.” Similarly, critics often argue that the Transcendental Argument for God (TAG) is no stronger than the Transcendental Argument for Not-God (TANG). I concede that presuppositionalism offers circular arguments (all ultimate arguments are circular and cannot be otherwise); however, I do not concede that all circular arguments are of a sort. The totality of the Bible’s networked assertions, assumptions, and implications are such that Christianity alone can account holistically for all that is in a way that no other proposed philosophical system can. It is impossible that the world could be other than what God made it to be and says that it is.

²⁶“What Is Literal Interpretation?” presented at the Mid-America Conference on Preaching at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary (October 19–20, 2000), 157–162; subsequently published in a short-run journal in India edited by one of McCune’s former students (*Sola Scriptura*, no. 3 [January 2002]: 3–12).

deliberate use of ambiguities such as puns and double entendres. But even they prove the rule because they are effective precisely because language is univocal. However, no language system can be built totally on ambiguity and equivocation.

The Bible was written in purely human languages with their fully human grammar, syntax and literary genres, by genuinely human beings out of their authentically human personalities, cultures, and linguistic backgrounds. The Bible was not written in Heavenly Hebrew, Holy Ghost Greek, or Atmospheric Aramaic. The message of the Bible (its truth-statements and truth-claims), however, is genuinely and exclusively divine. If the biblical languages are not genuine human languages, it would seem that they would ultimately be incapable of communicating divine information to human beings who must use human language.

*For hermeneutics, this principle of the univocal nature of language asserts that a passage of Scripture cannot have “deeper” meaning, multiple meanings, or any other forms of interpretation that are essentially *sensus plenior* (having a “fuller sense”). The divine message of the Bible does not come in equivocating word meanings but in univocal, propositional truth content.*

The Jurisdiction of Authorial Intent

This principle has been more widely addressed in evangelical circles in recent years. The governance of authorial intent as an interpretive principle is actually as old as mankind, being an aspect of the image of God which makes man a linguistic being. As with the univocal nature of language, this factor is indigenous to rational beings who alone intuitively possess and use the “rights of language” or the “received laws of language” as they were endowed by the Creator.

Correct biblical interpretation conveys the same meaning today that the Bible writers intended when they wrote. The hermeneutical task is to “find out the meaning of a statement (command, question) for the author and for the first hearers or readers, and thereupon to transmit that meaning to modern readers.”²⁷ An axiom in this regard is, “A text cannot mean what it never meant.”²⁸ “A believing scholar insists that the biblical texts first of all mean what they meant.”²⁹ This meaning is based ultimately on authorial intent. It answers the question as to what the author intended to communicate by his particular use of a human sign system (language).

Words convey meaning in association with other words; they do not carry meaning autonomously: “A word does not have meaning; it is

²⁷A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 5.

²⁸Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 27.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 13.

*assigned meaning through cultural convention and use.*³⁰ *The basic unit of language is not the word but the sentence, which then extends to the paragraph, section, and book, and in this case the Bible. “The meaning of a word depends not on what it is in itself but on its relation to other words and to other sentences which form its context.”*³¹ *This word association and its text-intention are produced by the authorship of a document: “In speaking of authorial intention, one does not try to reproduce what the author must have been thinking at a given point or why he wrote. Rather, the interpreter’s goal is to ascertain what the writer wanted to communicate through the terms he chose for his message.”*³²

For purposes of answering the question as to what literal interpretation is, this principle of the jurisdiction of authorial intent not only gives meaning and validity to the interpretation itself, it also serves as a limiting notion as to what a biblical passage may mean and what it cannot mean. A good query to use in evaluating an interpretation of a given passage is, “Is this what the biblical authorship intended to convey?” Such a principle would seem definitely to preclude finding the Church in the Old Testament since it is not mentioned there or, more particularly, finding the Church fulfilling prophecies given to the nation Israel, even in a “partial” sense. Fulfillment by the church would appear to be impossible to harmonize with authorial intent and would banish the Old Testament author from his own words.

The Unitary Authorship of Scripture

It is commonly asserted that the Bible has a “dual authorship” and from a certain perspective this may have some truth. The Bible does have human authors and a Divine Author. But the dichotomy of the usual understanding of “dual authorship” must be challenged. It is better to understand Scripture as having a unitary (rather than a binary, divine-human) authorship, which resulted in a unitary Bible with a divine and a human aspect. This is comparable to the divine and human natures in the single person of the God-man, Jesus of Nazareth. The difference between the biblical word and the Word made flesh is that the Bible is not an extension of the divine essence. Even as we must not divide the person of the God-man, we must not dichotomize the biblical authorship. Zuck appears to do exactly this by saying, “In interpreting the Bible we seek to understand what the Bible says, not the human author’s intended meaning.”³³

³⁰Darrell Bock, “New Testament Word Analysis,” in *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*, ed. Scott McKnight (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 102.

³¹Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 76.

³²Bock, “New Testament Word Analysis,” 98.

³³Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1991), 64.

The confluence of the divine and human participants in the authorship of Scripture is the essence of the doctrine of biblical inspiration. Inspiration is the “supernatural influence exerted on the sacred writers by the Spirit of God, by virtue of which their writings are given Divine trustworthiness.”³⁴ The human authors and the Divine Author were in an organic relationship in the production of an inerrant Bible. In a sense, inspiration is an act that encompasses a process and a result. Inspiration proper, however, belongs to the writings and not the writers (2 Tim 3:16, “All graphé [Scripture, script, writing] is theopneustos”), although the writers are obviously involved and cannot be excluded from the picture.

The interpretive value of the unitary divine-human authorship of Scripture via inspiration is that it guarantees an identity between God and the human author. What God said, the human author said; what the human author wrote, God wrote. More particularly for hermeneutics or literal interpretation, there is an identity of meaning because of the miracle of inspiration. What the human author meant is what God meant. It can be argued that this is a one-for-one identity of meaning. See 1 Corinthians 2:13 (NASB): “Which [revelatory] things we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.” This would appear to establish a most important point in literal interpretation. This identity of meaning prevents one from saying that the human author meant one thing but God meant another, or that God may have meant “more but never less” than the human author. The unitary authorship produced a single truth-intention in every passage of Scripture, with meaning coextensive to the divine and human participants in authorship.

The Textually Based Locus of Meaning

Thus far we have seen that the biblical languages (and all human language) convey univocal meaning, that this meaning is based on authorial intent, and that the unitary authorship of Scripture by means of inspiration guarantees an identity of meaning between the human authors and God. This all leads to a fourth ingredient of literal interpretation: meaning must be textually based.

The authorial divine-human truth intention of Scripture must be in the words of the passage. There is only one correct interpretation or meaning of a passage and that is the one that biblical authorship intended. And the only building blocks of that intent are the words left to us. (And the best resource for understanding that meaning is a lexicon.) Words cannot be made to carry some hidden freight of meaning that is not in the actual text of a passage as defined by the previous points.

³⁴B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1948), 131.

There cannot be two or more different meanings to the same words in a text.

It must be recognized of course that the words of a passage may carry implications beyond what are discernible in the text itself. Implications, however, are actually supplemental and are not to be construed as different meanings to the same words. Thus it is true that the Divine Author knows more implications of the Word of God than the human authors. Indeed, he knows all such implications. Human beings are not even aware of all the implications of their own speech much less those of the Word of God. However, all implications must be consistent with the textually-based truth-intention of an author. They must reproduce in some verbally/grammatically identifiable way the author's original text-intention or idea.

For example, statements of Christ's eternity legitimately imply his preexistence. But the church of the present age, it would seem, cannot even be an implied fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy given to the nation Israel because it would not be textually based. Such a meaningful/fulfillment could hardly be located in the Old Testament text. Nor would it really qualify as a legitimate implication of the Old Testament since its verbal/grammatical identification with the Old Testament text-intention is both tenuous and unclear.

*The only legitimate tool for extracting the univocal, authorially-intended and textually-based meaning of any given Scripture is grammatical-historical exegesis. Whatever meaning that cannot be gained by an exegesis of the text (the words) simply isn't there. All other such “meaning” must be imported into the text or read into the text from elsewhere, and partakes of *sensus plenior* in some form or to some degree. *Sensus plenior* includes all alleged meaning that is not textually based (i.e., not in the words of the passage). This encompasses all multiple meanings, senses, fulfillments, and the like. *Sensus plenior* in whatever shape or form assumes that words can take on some kind of an autonomous and expanding afterlife once they have left the author. But this post-authorial afterlife is inherently unstable and self-defeating because the expanded meaning must be gleaned by someone, and his own interpretations therefore are also subject to expansion and resignification. Communication is thus impossible and meaning is lost in a labyrinth of ever-increasing relativism and ambiguity.*

How does one arrive at the “fuller sense” of a passage if the meaning is not textually based and grounded in authorial intent as discussed before? Part of the baggage of a fuller sense is that it introduces the need for a method or an instrument of interpretation that can extract the essentially different meaning from somewhere external to the text in question. Since in this scheme meaning is not ultimately textually based and is not finally what the human author intended and wrote, one cannot use normal grammatical-historical hermeneutics on the text at hand.

One can resort to the Holy Spirit's “leading” in finding the fuller sense or deeper meaning of a text. That is, the Spirit more or less “reveals” what God intended and knew but which the human author

neither intended nor knew. But this seems tantamount to some kind of continuing revelation and denies the concept of a closed canon for this age.

A more conservative and popular method of finding the deeper meaning is Waltke's "Canonical Process Approach."³⁵ This says that later revelation in the biblical canon will give the meaning that the Divine Author knew and intended but of which the human author was oblivious. Generally speaking, this means that the New Testament will round out the meanings and senses of an Old Testament passage. Elliot Johnson's concept of "references plenior" appears to be but a variation of Waltke's approach.³⁶ Johnson seems to say that the truth intention of a biblical author may end up having more than one referent in the same words. If so, it would require that the locus of these multiple referents be elsewhere than in the immediate text.

In reality, this type of approach only shifts the problem to a later part of the biblical canon. Presumably the fuller, deeper, or extra meaning in the later part of the canon is textually based, univocal and exactly what the human author and Divine Author intended and wrote, even if the meaning of the text in the earlier part of the canon is not. Also, normal grammatical-historical interpretation is apparently quite adequate for the later part of the canon even if for the earlier part it is not. This all seems highly inconsistent and full of special pleading. One could just as well argue for fuller, deeper, or extra senses and multiple meanings for the later part of the canon, which is what Origen and many others have argued through the centuries! Sensus plenior in any form or by any other name is bereft of any objective limiting concept.

Conclusion

What do these factors of literal interpretation mean for certain aspects of current dispensational interpretation? They would appear to rule out double fulfillment, near and far fulfillment, some prophecies that are considered "generic,"³⁷ "typological-prophetic" interpretation, "patterns" of fulfillment and certain forms of indirect "linkage" (including "complementary fulfillment") between Old Testament prophecies and the present age. Despite the denials and nuances to the contrary, this all comes perilously near to simple resignification of a text. These all violate

³⁵Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament*, ed. John D. and Paul S. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 3–18.

³⁶Elliot Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 185. See also his essay, "Author's Intent and Biblical Interpretation," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. E. Radmacher and R. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 16–17, and Walter Kaiser's response, 441–46.

³⁷There are some prophecies that are generic, e.g., the seed of the woman in Gen 3:15, or the prophet like Moses in Deut 18:18.

one or more of the above principles of literal interpretation, and result in the confusion of Israel and the Church and other distinctions to one degree or another. Without elaboration, some implications of the above four factors of literal interpretation are that, among others—

- (1) *Jesus at the Father's right hand is not now sitting on David's throne.*
- (2) *The Messianic Kingdom is not inaugurated in the whole or in some phase.*
- (3) *The New Covenant was not intended by Jeremiah 31, et al., to find a literal, grammatical-historical fulfillment in the Church.*
- (4) *Joel 2:28ff did not have an authorially intended fulfillment on the Day of Pentecost.*

The New Testament use of the Old Testament is a complicated field of study, but it would be better hermeneutics to say that the self-contained, textually-based meaning of the Old Testament is never violated or given resignification in the New Testament. It would appear to be more prudent to look for an application or an adaptation by the New Testament of the textually-based Old Testament meaning, perhaps in an analogical or a principial fashion, such as that in Acts 13:46–47 (cf. Isa. 49:6), or in 1 Corinthians 14:21–22 (cf. Isa. 28:11), or in Matthew 2:15 (cf. Hos. 11:1), to name a few. In this way, the integrity of the text of both testaments is upheld and the integrity of human language and the truth intentions of the biblical authorship is maintained.