

Special S.N.A.P. Section

S.N.A.P. is No Snap: A Rejoinder to C. Richard Chewning's Biblical Orthodoxy

Steve Vander Veen
Calvin College

C. Richard Chewning should be commended for attempting to keep scholars who spend their time integrating biblical truth with the academic disciplines from making mistakes. However, Dr. Chewning is making a fatal error in emphasizing the importance of Scripture alone. The point is that Scripture does not, nor was it intended to, exist in a vacuum.

To maintain biblical orthodoxy requires the work of the Holy Spirit, yet according to Dr. Chewning, it also requires believing in the *sufficiency*, *necessity*, *authority*, and *perspicuity* (or **S.N.A.P.**) of Scripture. In other words, biblical orthodoxy requires something on God's part and something on humans' part to keep from sliding into something called neo-orthodoxy.

Dr. Chewning says that to remain orthodox, Christians are to rely on Scripture alone as the

source of propositional truths. He says the Bible is clear in terms of what these truths are, it is just a matter of following the correct hermeneutics. Dr. Chewning suggests allowing the "Bible to speak for the Bible," "allowing the 'simple' passages (truths) of Scripture to speak first," "bringing at least three passages of Scripture to bear on any pronouncement of truth in the areas involving faith and learning," and "investigating what has been the church's tradition in regard to the issue."¹

But in so doing, Dr. Chewning seems to be committing the sin he is trying to avoid: he is allowing general revelation to help humans understand special revelation. The Bible was written by humans for humans. Humans interpreted God's message when they wrote Scripture and humans interpret Scripture when they read Scripture. To keep themselves on the "straight and narrow," humans

adopt a certain hermeneutic. But what is the source of this hermeneutic? Ultimately, it is God Himself as he speaks through general revelation, or tradition, reason, and experience.

But allowing general revelation to help humans understand special revelation is not a sin, at least in the Reformed church's tradition:

*Reformed theology draws on the following descending order of authority: Scripture; the traditions of the church; reason and experience.... With respect to this third source, Reformed theology recognizes the importance of continued reflection and dynamic engagement with contemporary culture. Theology must be dialogical.*²

Reformed theology is "never finished, running between past and present, in each generation seeking anew to make sense of the faith passed down to it in the time in which it lives." St. Augustine called it "faith seeking understanding." In this slogan "there is something stable (faith—an enduring foundation) and yet something unstable (the search for understanding—a restless quest)."³ For example, if

humans did not use scientific reason to help them understand Scripture, they would still believe that the sun revolves around the earth. If humans did not rely on experience to help them understand Scripture, they would never fully understand the meaning of Providence and would wipe out everything Kierkegaard said.⁴ The point is that Scripture (special revelation), though *necessary*, is not *sufficient* for developing propositional truths: humans need general revelation to understand it; that is, the Holy Spirit works through general revelation. In fact, *general revelation may be sufficient by itself* (see below). Nor is Scripture *perspicuous*: if it were, faith would not be seeking understanding; it may be that faith would not even be necessary because these truths would be too obvious. Neither would there be several legitimate church traditions in Christendom.

To conclude, a quote from the Belgic Confession, one of the pillars of the Reformed church, may suffice:

BY WHAT MEANS GOD IS
MADE KNOWN TO US

We know Him by two means:
First, by the creation, preservation,

and government of the universe; which is before our eyes a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to see clearly the invisible things of God, even his everlasting power and divinity, as the apostle Paul says (Romans 1:20). All which things are *sufficient* to convince men and leave them without excuse. Second, He makes Himself more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word, that is to say, as far as is *necessary* for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation (*italics mine*).⁵

ENDNOTES

¹C. Richard Chewning, "Biblical Orthodoxy Requires the S.N.A.P. of Scripture," *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, in press.

²Calvin College, "An Engagement with God's World: A Statement of Purpose for the Core Curriculum of Calvin College," adopted by the faculty of Calvin College on November 3, 1997.

³Ibid.

⁴For an example of what Kierkegaard can contribute to the discussion of integration of faith and learning, see Steve Vander Veen's "Let's Quit *Thinking* About Integration for a Change," and "A Response by Steve Vander Veen to C. Richard Chewning's 'Relativistic Synthesis: Thwarting the Mind of Christ,'" *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business*, Fall 1997, pp. 7-18 and pp. 43-44.

⁵Guido de Bres, *Belgic Confession*, 1567.