The Search for the Truest Christian Doctrines and the True Knowledge of God

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In seeking to know God and know about him, we can think in terms of the sources of the knowledge of God, the processes that should act on those sources, and the resulting subjective and objective knowledge. To safeguard against an over-intellectual misunderstanding we have to define 'knowledge' somewhat widely, to include, for instance, obedience.

It is a matter of fact that among those who wish to say that Christianity is in some sense true and who wish to be known as Christians there is a debate and disagreement about what are the sources and what should be the processes that yield true knowledge of God. This debate and disagreement has become more intense as the ascendancy and success of the analytical and investigative approach to natural reality has become more marked. And as supernatural reality has been increasingly discounted or declared non-existent because it is beyond the competence of that approach. This is the debate at one level—we have to agree on the sources and processes 'rules' before we can meaningfully debate what is the knowledge those sources and processes yield.

One particular set of rules is the set that starts with the conviction that to know God and be known by him we are utterly dependent on the showing-mercy God taking a unilateral, supernatural and irresistible subjective action in our own dead sinful souls, breathing new life into them.[1] Building on this conviction this set of rules regards the canonical writings of the Bible, the being of God and God's acts of creation, judgement, providence and redemption and God's covenant signs, which those writings truly describe and explain, as the sole source of the knowledge of God for sinners, being God's faithful and coherent, but not exhaustive, self-disclosure, by which he speaks to us 'right now' (as J.I. Packer once put it), of himself, his purposes and plans, the condition of man, his promises and judgements, his provision for, and offer of, man's salvation in and through the Lord Jesus Christ, what he has done and said and still says, what he will do in the future. It regards the processes which

should operate on that source to yield subjective and objective knowledge of God as the devout study of, and Spirit-enlightened, prayerful and self-abasing meditation on, submission to and faithful embracing of that source by all Christians, and the submission to and faithful embracing of the saving Christ whom that source faithfully sets before us.

With the obligation of each Christian to self-critically weigh, alongside his own convictions about what the Bible means, the purpose and effect of the sacraments and the person and work of that saving Christ, with an openness to being proved wrong, that immense witness, the *consensus fidelii*, especially the teaching of those with the gift of teaching, but with the ultimate obligation, for those who feel they must play by these rules, to submit himself to his own conscience in the fear of God as to what the Bible says and means, how the sacraments work for knowing God and for faith and life, and who is that Christ and what is involved in faithfully submitting to him. Call these the 'Private Judgement' rules. ('I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes').

However it is also a matter of fact, often commented on, that different Christians and different groups of Christians, playing by this set of rules, have come to different conclusions about important, sometimes vital, parts of the knowledge of God. 'What is the Biblical doctrine of Justification?'; 'What is the purpose and effect of the sacraments?'; 'Can a Christian, once justified and having received the Holy Spirit, fall away and be eternally lost?'; 'How should we understand and think about predestination to life?'; 'Do those who are not saved by Christ suffer the judgement of eternal punishment?'; 'What is the relationship of the Christian to the Law of God?'; 'What does the Bible have to say, if anything, about how civil society should be ordered and governed?'; 'Does God need to be propitiated by the sacrifice of Christ before he can be reconciled to sinners and sinners to him?'; 'Does the Bible rule out, or does it not rule out, the generally accepted understanding of the chronology of the fossil record and life on earth?'; 'What place, if any, do the race, nation and land of Israel now hold in the purposes of God?'; 'Should we expect gifts of tongues, prophecy, exorcism and healing to be given today?'; 'How are we to understand 1 Peter 3:19?'; 'What is the true doctrine of the end times and Christ's return?'; 'Should women teach men?'; 'Is homosexuality a sin like any other sin?'; 'How should we understand Deuteronomy 7 and Luke 6:35, 36 in

the light of each other?' and the rest. These are debates at another level, having agreed the source(s) and processes.

Of course this diversity of view is used by Catholic theologians to support the case for a different set of rules—faithful submission to the teaching of an authoritative Magisterium as the process with the source, in Roman Catholicism, 'Tradition and scripture together form a single sacred deposit of the word of God, entrusted to the church'.[2] A good example is Cardinal Newman's 'Sermon to a mixed congregation: "Faith and Private Judgement" (1849)'.[3]

Nor are some Protestant pastors and theologians, though they agree with the private judgement source, always enthusiastic about the private judgement process being extended beyond the ordained presbyters to the ordinary Christians. Passages which explicitly or implicitly exhibit this lack of enthusiasm are to be found in Calvin,[4] Warfield,[5] Lloyd-Jones,[6] Packer.[7] Although Warfield, at least, elsewhere shows great awareness of the enormous issue at stake here—the soul's direct fellowship with God in Christ through his word.[8] Warfield agreed with the view that there were 'two Augustines'.[9] A case can be made that there were also two Calvins—and even two Warfields. There is unfinished business from the Reformation here.

The Christian who wants to debate to the truth at the first level (sources and processes), or who wants, at the second level, to play seriously by the private judgement rules and come (we stress again, humbly, self-critically, ready to have his mind changed and in the fear of God) to his own convictions on vital questions is looking for the exegetical, linguistic, philosophical, historical, and systematic theological strongest views for all sides in the debate and the strengths and weaknesses of possible counter arguments, as he tries to evaluate competing understandings of the right sources and processes or of an area of Christian truth in order to know God truly in the fullest sense of 'know'.

Christian debates at both levels have been happening (and are currently happening) since Jesus Christ ascended to heaven: in books; in articles; in journals; in face to face discussion both formally (set-piece) and informally; and, to some extent, latterly, on the internet. Some of these debates are in the public domain, some are not. It is here, in this vast repository of discussion, that the 'strongest views from all sides' are to be found.

To consider seriously these strongest views is perilous. It forces us to understand views we disagree with at their best, and exposes our own convictions to the strongest possible challenges. Our convictions may survive those challenges, or we may, in self-critical honesty, be forced to change them. We all know how traumatic and humbling that is.

But for the private judgement Christian who wants to brave that peril, to be certain that the doctrines he believes are the true doctrines and the way he lives his life is the true way, or to find out what are the rival views on points and behaviours where he has not got a conviction, the ideal situation would have the following components:

1. Access to the strongest views.
2. Comparison of the strongest views and comment and challenge on their strengths and weaknesses from all informed commentators (let's say, leading/recognised pastors, scholars, theologians, exegetes).
3. Direct publically available interaction and debate between such commentators and strongest views.
4. Direct participation in that comparison, comment, challenge, interaction and debate by all Christians who wish to so compare, comment, challenge, interact and debate.
5. Willingness of the informed commentators to interact with other Christians who participate and willingness of all participants to respond earnestly and honestly to challenges and questions.

Obviously it is possible in principle for the private judgement Christian, by exhaustively mining all sources in the public domain, to go some way in constructing some of these components for any or all disputed points. This would often be a very considerable task. Even were it to be done, the result would lack that element of ongoing challenge and debate between the views of Christians still alive which is needed.

Technologies exist which could bring that ideal situation much closer than it is at present. This essay is a plea for Christians to make greater, more serious use of those technologies.

The technologies are computer databases and the internet.

Many of the doctrines on which private judgement Christians disagree can be visualised as networks. The nodes of the net are the arguments (exegetical,

linguistic, etc.). The lines between the nodes link the arguments together, either in support, or in contradiction. A computer database is an ideal way of representing networks.

As a vehicle for ongoing debate, the internet has the following advantages. It is faster than articles and books. It enables direct interaction, challenge and response. It is slower than verbal debate, allowing time for reflection. Arguments can be withdrawn and improved. It can be directly in the public domain. Very importantly, it allows participation by all serious parties, not just scholars and theologians.

A serious long term effort could be made, combining these two technologies, to represent past and current debates (e.g. the debate about penal substitutionary atonement and the wrath of God amongst evangelicals, the debate about homosexuality among Anglicans, the 'Bishop Wright view' versus the 'Oak Hill view' of what the over-arching paradigm of the Bible really is), and a framework for future debates in this way, available on the internet. Past debates could be revisited, and current and future debates conducted in a sustained and disciplined way, open to all.

Great care would be needed in framing the groundrules for such debates, such as ensuring lack of bias among web moderators, to prevent a descent into the repetition, irrelevance, point scoring, silence when confronted by a strong argument, name calling and disenchantment which are regrettable features of many internet debates. The result would be of immense benefit to all Christians wanting to play by the private judgement rules. The benefit would also be great even if the nodes of the debate were not the detailed arguments themselves but just a précis and the references to books and articles and internet websites where the arguments could be found.

This would be a permanent dynamic resource, continually open to new contributions, continually corrected and improved, refined, updated, continually available to new and existing Christians and Christian enquirers, 'until we all arrive at the unity of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God, at a complete man, at the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, in order that no more we may be infants, being blown and carried round by every wind of teaching in the sleight of men, in cleverness unto the

craftiness of error, but speaking truth in love we may grow into him in all respects, who is the head, Christ, of whom all the body being fitted together and brought together through every band of supply according to the operation in measure of each one part makes the growth of the body for building of itself in love'.

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ENDNOTES

1. For example 'And finally, we need to remind ourselves that as Christian men we must cherish a frank and hearty faith in a supernatural salvation. It is not enough to believe that God has intervened in this natural world of ours and wrought a supernatural redemption: and that He has Himself made known to men His mighty acts and unveiled to them the significance of His working. It is upon a field of the dead that the Sun of righteousness has risen, and the shouts that announce His advent fall on deaf ears … In vain the redemption, in vain its proclamation, unless there come a breath from heaven to breathe upon these slain that they may live. The redemption of Christ is therefore no more central to the Christian hope than the creative operations of the Holy Spirit upon the heart: and the supernatural redemption itself would remain a mere name outside of us and beyond our reach, were it not realised in the subjective life by an equally supernatural application.' B. B. Warfield, "Studies in Theology." *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. IX, Christian Supernaturalism (V) p43.
2. Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation, Second Vatican Council, ch. 2, para 10.
3. 'Since men now-a-days deduce from Scripture, instead of believing a teacher, you may expect to see them waver about; they will feel the force of their own deductions more strongly at one time than at another, they will change their minds about them, or perhaps deny them altogether; whereas this cannot be, while a man has faith, that is, belief that what a preacher says to him comes from God. This is what St. Paul especially insists on, telling us that Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, are given us that "we may all attain to unity of faith", and, on the contrary, in order "that we be *not* as children tossed to and fro, and carried about by every gale of doctrine," Cardinal Newman, *Faith and Private Judgement* (1849). A sermon preached to a mixed congregation.
4. 'As our present design is to treat of the visible Church, we may learn even from the title of mother, how useful and even necessary it is for us to know her; since there is no other way of entrance into life, unless we are conceived by her, born of her,

nourished at her breast, and continually preserved under her care and government till we are divested of this mortal flesh, and "become like the angels".'
John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV.

5. 'We must not overlook, in passing, that it is by "a due use of the ordinary means" that the learned and unlearned alike are said to be able to attain a sufficient knowledge of the saving message of Scripture. By the phrase "a due use of the ordinary means", not only is the need of an infallible interpreting Church denied; but also all dependence on extraordinary revelations, the "inner light" of the mystical sectaries, and the like, is excluded. Within the "ordinary means" is included that "inward illumination of the Spirit of God", which is declared to be necessary to the saving understanding of Scripture in section 6, and which is here declared to be an ordinary endowment of the children of God. Within them is included all the religious and gracious means which God has placed at the disposal of His people, in the establishment of His Church and its teaching functions.' B. B. Warfield, The Westminster Assembly and its Work. *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. VI, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, p. 233.
6. 'Those instances, then, show us the need of preaching. It is not enough that you have the Word and that you have the Spirit in you, you still need this further help.' D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Exposition of Romans,* ch. 10:14-17, p. 268.
7. 'What *does* make Bible study harder for laymen nowadays than it used to be is the breakdown of the great evangelical tradition of large-scale expository preaching Sunday by Sunday from our pulpits. The New Testament pattern is that public preaching of God's Word provides, so to speak, the main meals, and constitutes the chief means of grace, and one's own personal meditations on biblical truth should come in as ancillary to this, having the nature of a series of supplementary snacks —necessary, indeed, in their place, but never intended to stand alone as a complete diet. There is something deeply unnatural and unsatisfactory in a situation where the people of God have to rely entirely on personal Bible study for their spiritual nourishment, due to lack of effective expository preaching in public worship.' J. I. Packer, *God Has Spoken*, ch. 6, *God's Word Heard*, p. 135.
8. 'Such a Word of God, each of us knows he needs,—not a Word of God that speaks to us only through the medium of our fellow-men, men of like passions and weaknesses with ourselves, so that we have to feel our way back to God's word through the church, through tradition, or through the apostles, standing between us and God; but a Word of God in which God speaks directly to each of our souls. Such a Word of God, Christ and his apostles offer us, when they give us the Scriptures, not as man's report to us of what God says, but as the very Word of God

itself, spoken by God himself through human lips and pens'. B. B. Warfield, The Inspiration of the Bible. *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield,* vol. I, Revelation and Inspiration, p. 70.

9. 'But his doctrine of the Church and Sacraments had not yet given way before his doctrine of grace when he was called away from this world of partial attainment to the realms of perfect thought and life above. It still maintained a place by its side, fundamentally inconsistent with it, limited, modified by it, but retaining its own inner integrity. It is the spectacle of collectivism and individualism striving to create a *modus vivendi*; of dependence on God alone, and the intermediation of a human institution endeavouring to come to good understanding. It was not and is not possible for them to do so. Augustine had glimpses of the distinction between the invisible and the visible Church afterward elaborated by his spiritual children: he touched on the problem raised by the notions of baptismal regeneration and the necessity of the intermediation of the Church for salvation in the face of his passionately held doctrine of the free grace of God, and worked out a sort of compromise between them....He left behind him, therefore, a structure which was not complete: but what he built he built to last. Had he been granted, perhaps, ten years longer of vigorous life, he might have thought his way through this problem also. He bequeathed it to the Church for solution, and the Church required a thousand years for the task. But even so, it is Augustine who gave us the Reformation. For what was the Reformation, inwardly considered, but the triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church?' B. B. Warfield, Studies in Tertullian and Augustine. *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. IV, Augustine and his Confessions, p. 284. (Except that, in the view of this essay, the triumph was not complete; there is unfinished business: not everyone is persuaded that the private judgment rules are the right rules).