



Viewpoint

Our purpose is to intentionally glorify God in the holiness of his divine essence through encouraging doctrinal reformation and prayer for spiritual awakening in North America and beyond

How I Changed My Mind: Theological Method

John H. Armstrong

It seems odd that changing one's mind is seen as weakness, or worse yet, defecation. I am routinely amazed to hear prominent Christians say: "I have never changed my mind—never." Such statements are often applauded, especially when they are made by highly-regarded ministers. Such a statement seems, at first glance, to show stability.

But should ministers who affirm their beliefs in public ordination, and teach biblical doctrine to the Church, ever change their minds? I have come to believe that changing one's mind is of the very essence of servant-leadership. To be genuinely teachable means you are prepared to change your mind when the facts warrant it. The humanness of the person who changes his/her mind is obvious. None of us has everything right at any single point in our Christian journey so why do we often act like we do? Augustine, one of the greatest minds the Church ever produced, wrote a book called *Retractions* toward the end of his life. In it he cited a number of things that he had previously written or taught that he later wished to change upon deeper thought. In the last century several articles appeared in Christian periodicals that bore the title "How I Changed My Mind." (In one case there was even a book about the influence of the great theologian Karl Barth titled, *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*.)

So, have I changed my mind? Yes, most definitely. But how, and why? There are several areas where I have changed my mind. I will presently address only one. (In future issues I hope to address several others.) I have been forced, upon deeper reflection about theological method, to give up what I call epistemological certitude.

What on earth is epistemology?

Epistemology is a philosophical word that refers to how we *know* something. (It is derived from the Greek word for knowledge.) Strictly speaking, epistemology is the investigation of what distinguishes justified belief from mere opinion. All of us employ—formally or informally, consciously or unconsciously—some kind of epistemological approach to how we know and believe. What makes us sure that the information we have is true? In theology there are various kinds of epistemology at work in how theologians come to conclusions about what the Bible teaches on a given subject. For example, how do I *know* that Jesus is God incarnate? What kind of *certainty* do I have that this truth claim is true, and how do I arrive at this certainty? Such questions are the stuff of epistemology.

We all hold certain beliefs that are based upon prior beliefs. In this sense all of us have a foundation upon which we build theological thought. But the epistemological certitude I am referring to is that of classical foundationalism. The simplest way to explain this idea is by a metaphor. Classical foundationalism sees truth as rising like a building under construction. The foundation on which classical foundationalism is built is "either a set of unquestioned beliefs or certain first principles" which form the basis, or foundation, for all other knowledge. Viewed this way foundationalist theology builds from the ground up. Certain *first premises* must be granted and then everything else

builds upon these. In this framework, reasoning goes in one direction—from the constructed philosophical foundation up. Strong foundationalists, and this includes many of the most popular Reformed dogmatists and teachers on the conservative side, seek a steady, unshakable and certain knowledge. This knowledge is built into a system of thought (theology) by means either of deduction (i.e., deducing ideas from other, or innate, truths; e.g. the approach of Descartes) or by induction (thus deriving truths from sense impressions caused by the material world; e.g. Locke).¹ The first is more likely to be the approach you encounter in Reformed theology.

In attempting to refute the Enlightenment emphasis, theology over the past three hundred years, both liberal and conservative, has generally sought to find a solid foundation that could establish all Christian truth claims. The *conclusions* of the conservative approach are usually closest to the ancient biblical

record but the way these conclusions were arrived at creates a set of problems for those who embrace the system.

In conservative theological foundationalism the goal of theology has generally been to amass true statements (seen as a series of factual propositions) and then to arrange them into a logical and coherent whole. The Bible is seen as a *compendium* of truths that can be discovered, unlocked and arranged by "scientific" methods (e.g. hermeneutics used the right way). An illustration of this type of approach can be seen in the popular systematic theology of Wayne Grudem. Grudem's definition of systematic theology is "the attempt to determine what the whole Bible teaches about any given topic." John Franke suggests that the agenda employed by such theologians "glorifies reason and deifies science."² I have changed my mind about the way to do theology, and I confess I now agree with Franke's conclusion.

The dangers of a nonfoundationalist approach (or "soft" foundationalism) are quite real. The most obvious one is relativism. Some

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have suggested that without foundationalism as a starting point you land on a slippery slope that leads to nihilism, an extreme skepticism that believes nothing in the world is *ultimately* real. While I acknowledge that theological relativism is a danger, and that particular theologies allow for almost anything, I also recognize that no theological enterprise can secure the truth in a way that is not subject to distortion since those who produce theology are finite and fallen human beings. In the words again of John Franke, "A non-foundationalist approach to theology seeks to respond positively and appropriately to the situatedness of all human thoughts and therefore to embrace a principal theological pluralism."³

Such a process will argue that the ultimate authority in theology is the living triune God alone, not a particular set of theological constructs. If there is a foundation in Christian theology, and I believe that there must be, then it is not found in the Church, Scripture, tradition or culture. The biblical foundation, according to the witness of Scripture and tradition, must be God revealed in Jesus Christ. (In the words of the apostle: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, *has made him known*" [John 1:18 TNIV]).

The conclusion that the true foundation for all theology is Jesus Christ scares the daylights out of some conservatives. You can readily see why this is the case if you ponder carefully for a moment. The threat of "relativism" is real, especially in postmodern times. So, how do we know that we really *know* God? How do we establish a proper foundation, since everyone has a foundation? "If we must speak of 'foundations' for Christian faith and its theological enterprise, then we must speak only of the triune God as disclosed in polyphonic fashion through Scripture, the church, and even the world, albeit always in accordance with the normative witness to

divine self-disclosure contained in Scripture."⁴ *Read this quotation several times.* The conclusion is crucial! Simply put, foundationalism (as a system for doing theology) must be rejected because it is too small a philosophical approach for the revelation of God that is in Jesus Christ alone. But we still have a very real foundation, one openly disclosed in history. We can never secure truths completely, or precisely, because we are fallen and finite. We can and we must listen to Christ alone. We must call no man master, and no theology, or system of theology is settled and final. This is what is meant by the revelation from heaven at the Transfiguration.

Then from the cloud came a voice that said, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him! When the voice had spoken, Jesus was found alone. And they kept silent and in those days told no one any of the things they had seen (Luke 9:35-36 NRSV).

Theology must be a humble human attempt to "hear him"—never about rational approaches to texts. The standard evangelical approach, used since the mid-nineteenth century, sees the Bible providing the factual and loosely organized material that we can then put into a coherent system of truth. This has been rightly called a "concordance" view of theology. You gather all the verses on a given subject, sort them all out, put them in their proper place in your system, and then develop (or write) a theology, formal or otherwise. This theology is then transferred as if the *system itself* contains, or is, the truth of God. Wayne Grudem represents an example of this method when he asserts that systematic theology *is* finally the effort to determine what the whole Bible teaches on any given subject.⁵

What I am convinced of, having changed my mind on the way to go about doing good theology, is that a nonfoundationalist (or "soft" foundationalist) method is best calculated to serve the life of the Church in any given time in history and culture. Conservative and Reformed theologian John Jefferson Davis states my conclusion well.

[The concordance model] does not take adequate account of the social context of the theological task and the historicity of all theological reflection. The method tends to promote

a repetition of traditional formulations of biblical doctrine, rather than appropriate recontextualizations of the doctrines in response to changing cultural and historical conditions.⁶

So, what's the big deal about changing our minds about theological method? Well, in the first place a different approach to theology could cause a great deal more humility in the pulpit and the pew. Reformed theology is a beautiful and biblical approach to truth but it does not provide a perfect or failsafe system that is beyond further question. Further, other types of theology plainly have a serious contribution to be made to the Church. I remain Reformed in my world and life view. I remain Reformed in my central emphasis upon God, his glory, his grace, and his sovereignty. But my Reformed theology is more chastened these days. I hope that my theology will remain open to the whole Church and continually submit itself to the insights of all the great Christian traditions and what the Bible affirms and denies. The issue here is not replacing theology with something else. This is the error of the pragmatic evangelical baby-boomers. The real issue is how do we do theology so that we glorify the Living Word who reveals God in human history? How do we "listen to him?" My change in methodology allows me to enter a dialogue with new eyes and a new willingness to listen and learn from others. It is an evangelical and ecumenical theology in the best sense. This has made a profound difference in my personal life. Whereas I once saw truth in a closed system created by a very small group of theologians whom I believed wrote the last and best word, I am now willing to listen and learn from all my brothers and sisters who honor Christ and the gospel with me.

NOTES:

1. Stanley R. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), 30-31.
2. *Beyond Foundationalism*, 37.
3. John R. Franke, "Reforming Theology," in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Volume 65, Number 1, 2003, 11.
4. "Reforming Theology," 11.
5. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 21.
6. John Jefferson Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 67.

Author

Dr. John H. Armstrong



has been president of Reformation & Revival Ministries since 1991. He is the editor of both *Viewpoint* and *Reformation & Revival Journal*, a quarterly designed for Church leadership.

