

Parableman

Some say I speak in parables. The reality is far more complex. Within these walls you may find musings on philosophy, theology, politics, and Christian apologetics (without parables -- I'm a much more competent straight-talker than storyteller).

Foundationalism and Starting With God

By [Jeremy Pierce](#) on April 3, 2011 7:25 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(6\)](#)

[Andy Naselli has posted a short excerpt](#) from D.A. Carson and Tim Keller's *Gospel-Centered Ministry*, one of the new series of [Gospel Coalition](#) booklets. The excerpt explains why the Gospel Coalition's statement of faith begins with God rather than with scripture. I hold both Carson and Keller in high regard, and it's very rare that I can identify anything to question from either of them. But this excerpt strikes me as being either ignorant about the meaning of a basic philosophical term or completely mistaken in how to apply it.

Carson and Keller's reasoning is basically that they want to resist what they see as a fault in the elevation of reason in the Enlightenment. Evangelical statements of faith in the past begin with a doctrine of scripture and then proceed to derive theological commitments in a systematic way via exegesis of that scripture. The result, according to Carson and Keller, is the presentation of a system of thought that gives the appearance of being deduced by unquestionable reasoning from the starting point of scripture.

It's their next move that I find problematic. They criticize such an approach by calling it foundationalist. The only hint as to what they mean by that is what they go on to say. They resist it because our cultural location affects our interpretation and relies too much on a rigid subject-object distinction, and we need to pay attention to historical theology, philosophy, and social reflection.

I'm not sure what any of that has to do with foundationalism. I have no problem with pointing out that our cultural location affects our interpretation. The subject-object distinction is a bit rigid if we ignore that we can be both subject and object in different respects, and being one can influence the ways in which one is the other. We certainly do need to pay attention to historical theology, philosophy, and social reflection. But how is any of that non-foundationalist? Foundationalism in epistemology is the thesis that our knowledge has a structure with a foundation, a basis upon which everything else is built. The beliefs in the foundation ought to be the best sort of beliefs we could have, ones that we can know to be true or have very good reason to believe. Some such beliefs would be self-evident or knowable just by thinking about them. Others might be learned by reliable processes that we can't prove to be true or reliable but that are genuinely reliable and thus lead to knowledge or justified beliefs.

I can't figure out how foundationalism creates any problem for any of what Carson and Keller are worried about. If the idea is that we shouldn't start with the foundation of scripture and instead start with the foundation of God, then that's still foundationalism, just with a different foundation. If the idea is that there are sources of information that we assume to be perfectly good that can be bad and lead us to false information, then foundationalism accepts that. Our biases can influence what we take to be a good foundation and thus end up with beliefs in our foundation that shouldn't be there. If the idea is that it's legitimate to have sources in the foundation that philosophers of the Enlightenment wouldn't want there, it's still foundationalism. It's just arguing for a different foundation.

The alternative to foundationalism is coherentism. Coherentism uses the raft model to contrast with the pyramid model of foundationalism. The idea behind coherentism is that your beliefs can be perfectly justified or a set of knowledge even if they're not based on anything legitimate. All it takes is for your beliefs to cohere. If they're not inconsistent, if there's no contradiction anywhere in there, then you know everything you believe. Such a view is so radically incompatible with Christian teaching in scripture that I can't imagine Carson or Keller seriously entertaining it. They hold that you can't know God without your information coming from God in some way, either by scripture or by coming through the testimony of a believer (or, in rare cases, by a more miraculous way of coming to understand, but the source would nonetheless be God). In fact, Carson and Keller are both Calvinists, and their Reformed theology has it that any of our beliefs leading to salvation are put in place by God, either directly or by some human means. What grounds them as knowledge is that God places them there and allows them to serve as a legitimately-held belief. The basis of any Christian's theology is therefore beliefs bestowed upon us by God that are epistemically grounded by God's miraculous working in our hearts and minds. Knowledge and belief-justification in Reformed theology strike me as particularly foundationalist. Coherentism is basically relativism about truth or knowledge (depending on whether you're a coherentist about truth or knowledge). I'm 100% sure that both Carson and Keller would consider coherentism incompatible with their understanding of truth, knowledge, what justifies our beliefs, and so on.

Now there is a tendency among emergentists and pseudo-postmodernists on the fringes of evangelicalism to use the word 'foundationalism' to refer to a very narrow version of foundationalism held by Enlightenment philosophers and then to mis-label all evangelicals as foundationalist and thus living in the dark ages. But foundationalism itself is much broader, and it surprises me to see Keller and Carson giving the term up so easily while defending a view that seems as far as I can tell to be just as foundationalist as the view they're criticizing. I find their reference pretty puzzling, unless they're taken in by this group that they've both spent a good deal of time not giving in to, co-opting a mistaken understanding of what foundationalism is merely because some of their philosophically amateurish opponents have adopted a jaundiced view of what foundationalism is in order to strike it down with little argument. If that's what's going on here, then I would have expected better of both Keller and Carson. If that's not what's going on, I'm at a complete loss.

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By European observer on [April 3, 2011 8:52 PM](#)

Hi there! I'm not familiar with the people you mention but I'm at a loss too about what precisely is at stake here.

The way you define 'foundationalism' and 'coherentism' makes coherentism seem like a necessary condition for foundationalism; surely the pyramid will crumble if there's inconsistency or incoherence involved.

If there can be different 'foundationalisms' and 'arguing for a different foundation' then there can be several pyramid-shaped rafts floating on water, and the distinction between 'foundationalism' and 'coherentism' seems like one without a difference: People may hope, suspect or boldly claim to be 'anchored' but, as you note, they won't be able to prove it even if it's the case!

By [Jeremy Pierce](#) on [April 3, 2011 9:45 PM](#)

According to foundationalism, what makes the structure secure is that it is supported by the base. According to coherentism, what makes the structure secure is that it hangs together consistently. You could have a structure that does both, in which case both theories would consider it genuine knowledge (or genuine truth, or whatever it is that the theory is about).

There is a hybrid theory -- foundherentism -- advocated by Linda Zagzebski. Someone mentioned it in a comment thread I was participating in recently. It's a fairly minority view, though, from what I understand. I'm not sure exactly how it works (it's been over a decade since I've looked at this stuff). Maybe it considers both features sufficient conditions, or maybe it considers both necessary conditions (those would be two very different theories), or maybe it's more complicated than that. But certainly the two views are not exhaustive of the possible structures knowledge might have. It's just that hardly anyone, to my knowledge, has both given a sustained criticism of foundationalism and also defended an alternative structure that is not coherentism. A few people have, but my understanding (as a non-specialist in epistemology, I admit) is that such views haven't won wide support.

By [Rey](#) on [April 4, 2011 6:50 PM](#)

Jeremy, do you have any recommendations on material that deals with foundationalism and coherentism? I admit, that I've come across that post-modernish use of the term quite a few times in regard to Scripture and then sometimes even pitting that against a Van Tillian transcendental argument.

By [Jeremy Pierce](#) on [April 4, 2011 7:11 PM](#)

Transcendental arguments could be used by either view. Kant is especially known for them, and he was a foundationalist. Pretty much every transcendental argument can be reconceived without changing anything essential as a deductive argument with premises and a conclusion. Those presuppositionalists who say that their view is better because it only uses transcendental arguments are making a huge mistake about what their own arguments are really up to (or about what classical arguments are up to, anyway).

I suggest reading the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on foundationalism](#) and [the article about Coherentism](#).

By Keith on [April 6, 2011 12:46 AM](#)

I think I remember Carson talking about foundationalism in his book on culture. He notes a difference between broad and narrow foundationalism, mentioning Audi and (maybe) David K. Clark as making the distinction. But he seemed somewhat non-committal on the issue if I remember right.

I don't think the use of foundationalism in the narrow sense as the package deal Enlightenment idea is limited to the "fringe" of evangelicals. I would say it is the dominant use in theology as a whole, of all stripes. In fact, most theologians don't seem to be aware of the broader sense or the epistemological issues surrounding the philosophical use. I am not sure that I see a problem given that (a) it is a booklet and there is little space for trying to completely reorient a term well entrenched in usage, (b) neither are trained philosophers, and (c) to say what they say about foundationalism in the sense that theologians use it has little to no bearing on the philosophical issue. The only drawback might be that the attack on foundationism in the narrow sense in theology is often supposed to then support coherentism or various other ideas associated with Wittgenstein and Quine. But to deny foundationalism itself as the theologians use it doesn't seem to cause any harm; it is the further conclusion they draw that is problematic.

Actually, I am more surprised in what they are saying in another sense. The typical theological critique tries to show that foundationalism (as the theologians use it) tainted the location and function of the doctrine of Scripture. So a la Vanhoozer and Webster we ought to place it back within the doctrine of God and the Trinitarian economy of salvation. But I think Helm has done a lot of articles showing that a lot of this critique is faulty from the standpoint of historical theology. The older theologians aren't guilty of this charge to begin with. So that is a bit surprising to me.

By blake.landon.reas on [April 6, 2011 8:29 AM](#)

I am surprised that Carson would make this mistake. I have never understood how people can misunderstand

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foundationalism.

The reactionary stance seems to be against the Enlightenment Foundationalism that is based on Pure Reason, but most of the Reformed Theologians I have read either reject this out right as false, or qualify it to such an extent to make it unrecognizable. I think John Frame refers to a biblical view being termed: Biblical Foundationalism. I think that captures a Christian view adequately.

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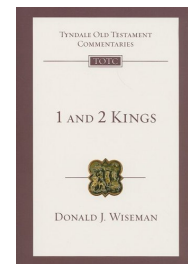
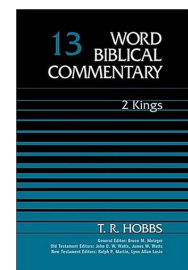
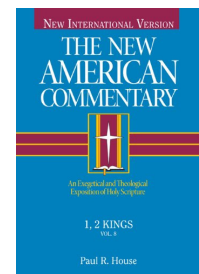
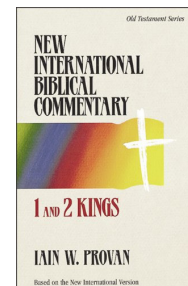
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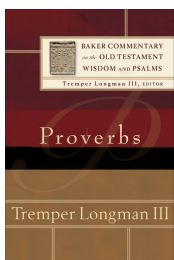
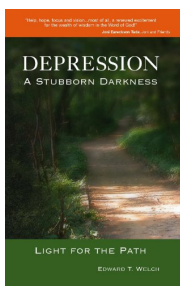
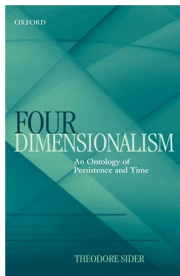
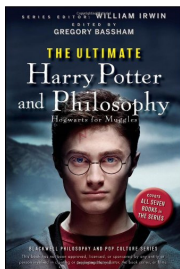
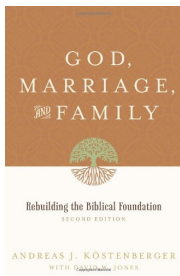
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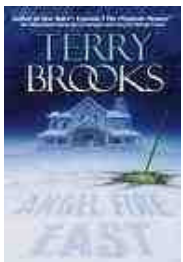
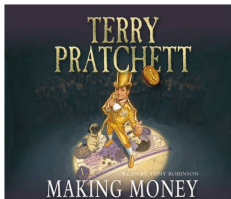
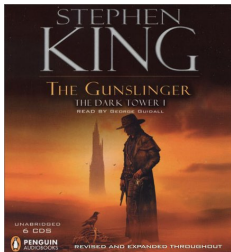
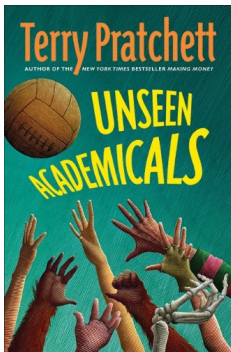
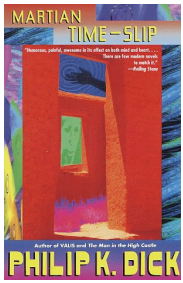
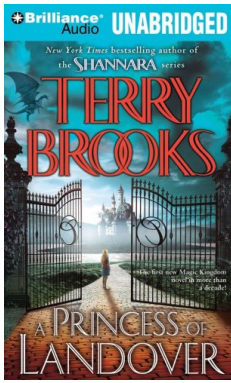
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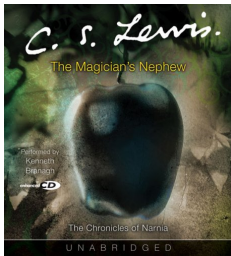
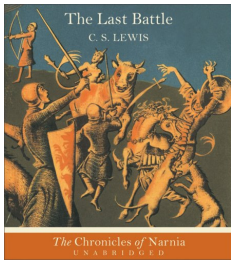
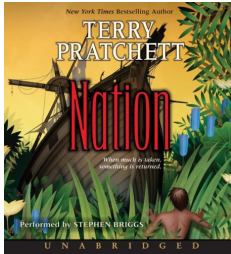
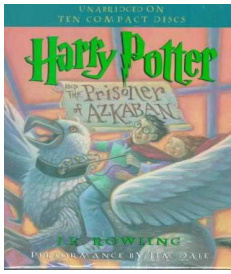
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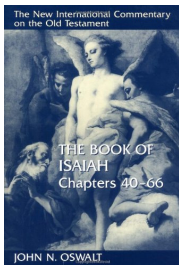
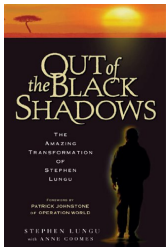
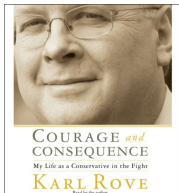


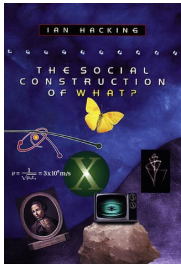
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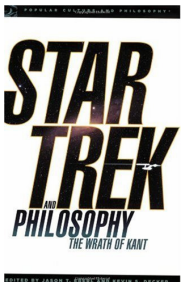
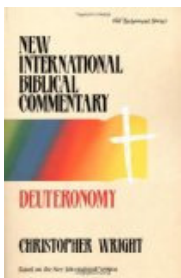
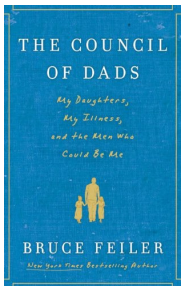
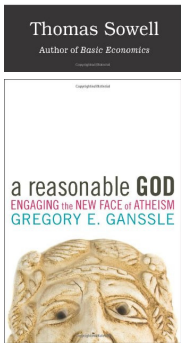


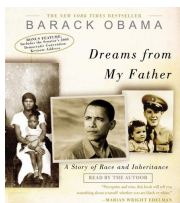
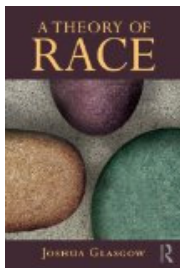
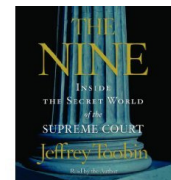
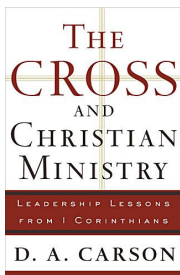
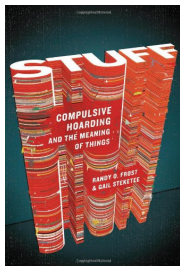
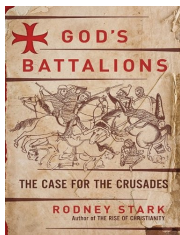
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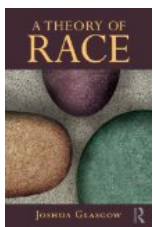


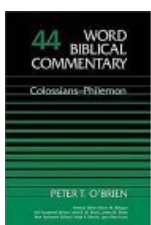
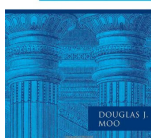
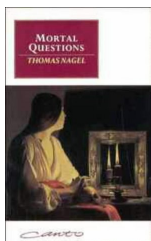
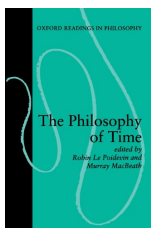
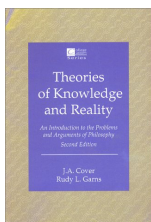
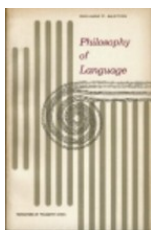
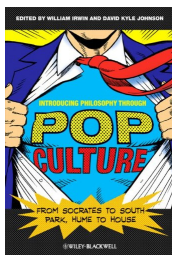
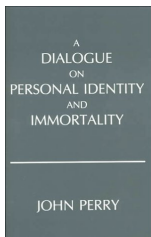
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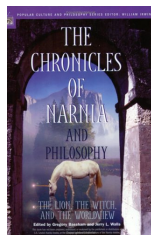
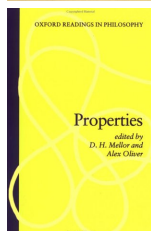
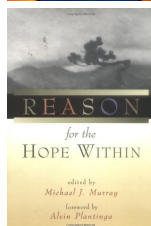
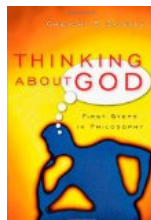
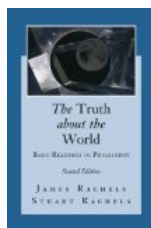
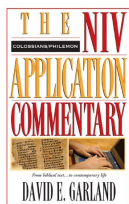




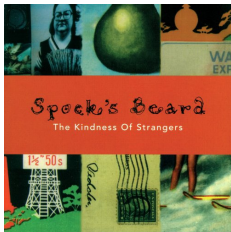
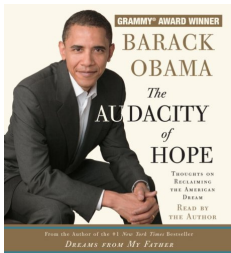
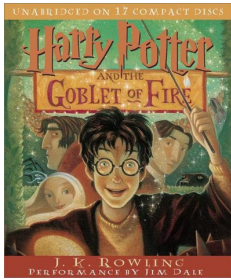
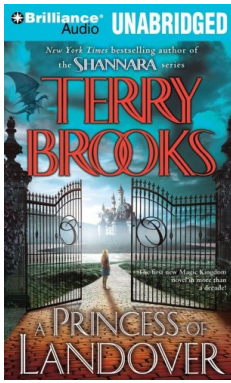
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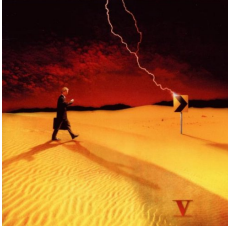
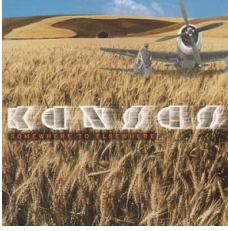
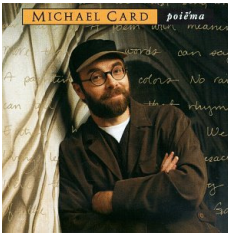
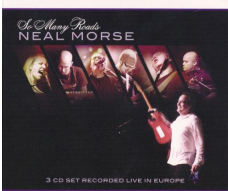






I've Been Listening To

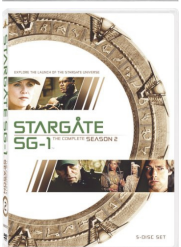
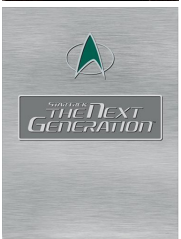
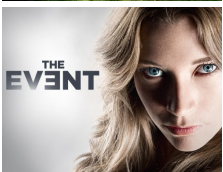




I've Been Watching



Pirates of the Caribbean





Games I've Been Playing

Go Fish

Uno (Sophia and I each won)

Gnu's Red Riding Hood Dice Adventure Game

Last Word (Sophia and I each won)

Variation on Hearts (I won)

Crazy Eights (I won)

Carcassonne with Carcassonne: Inns & Cathedrals, Carcassonne: Traders & Builders, and Carcassonne: The Princess & The Dragon (Tim Albert and Mark Quick tied for the win)

Carcassonne (I won)

War (card game) (Sophia won)

The Settlers of Catan (Sam won)

Chutes and Ladders (Ethan won)

Scramble (Wink won two, Bonnie Lindblom won two, Carl Burdick won one, and Bill Carroll won another)

Go Wacky! (Sophia and I each won)

Citadels (Sam won)

[Chutes and Ladders](#) (Sophia won)

Other Stuff



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Go

Example: *John 1 or love one another*
(ESV)

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