

# **THE ROLE AND USE OF EVIDENCE IN REFORMED PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS**

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part 1 of 2

To César Moreno Pérez, my Daddy,  
who first modeled to me a life of faith seeking understanding

## **I. INTRODUCTION.**

Bible-believing, orthodox, Evangelical Christians must acknowledge that some of the most absurd internal disputes among ourselves are those often found between contending schools of apologetics. I do not mean to say that such are not important issues to be discussed in depth and detail, nor that any school is as good as another. As it will become clear in the development of the present paper, I hold to certain convictions and commitments regarding the task of apologetics. The absurdity to which I refer is that of wasting time and effort in beating fellow Christians because they don't counter unbelief in the appropriate manner, instead of actually dealing with the real world of unbelief. It is obviously easier to theorize in the safe environment of an ivory tower than to put our big ideas to work in the proper arena to fight unbelief.<sup>i</sup>

An oversimplified, broad (and, in my opinion, misleading) characterization of the major divide in apologetics would picture two contending parties: "evidentialism"<sup>ii</sup> and presuppositionalism;<sup>iii</sup> the former making faith depend on evidence, and the latter denying any value to evidence in defending the faith. Although this is a caricature of the debate, it is sad to realize that many people actually hold these views, including some of the educated ones involved in the debate.

In the pages that follow, I present and defend what I take to be the proper basic understanding of presuppositionalism (beyond narrow partisanship), in order to pursue a particular sub-species of it. I also argue for the way in which such an approach understands evidence,<sup>iv</sup> and can benefit from the valuable contributions coming from the "evidentialist" camp.

## **II. THE CHRISTIAN'S STARTING POINT.**

Reformed presuppositional apologetics is characterized by its contention that a Christian's assured belief in the core of the Christian faith does not depend on evidence.<sup>v</sup>

Whether or not he is aware of it, whether he is outspoken or reserved about it, and moreover, whether or not he wills it that way, every true Christian presenting and defending the Christian message shares with his fellow believers the same starting point. Whatever doorway God has used to bring each Christian to a personal and saving relationship with him, the believer's knowledge and certainty of the core of his Christian beliefs depends not on the efficacy of the method, technique or arguments that triggered or accompany his believing, but on the internal, efficacious and irresistible witness of the Holy Spirit.

To be precise, we need to use the passive voice. It is not the case that the Christian is sure that Christianity is true, in the sense that he is the subject bringing about such certainty as a result of his action (i. e. his having faith or believing). Rather, the Christian is enlightened and assured of that truth by God. Certainty is *not* something that the autonomous fallen creature can bring about. This often leads nonbelievers into the path of skepticism – which is the most proper and sound conclusion for man when he foolishly attempts to be autonomous. In contrast, the Christian has given up the arrogant pretension of being the supreme judge, the ultimate standard of what is rational and true, and has received humbly the certainty or assurance which God grants and of which man is incapable on his own.

The regenerated believer does not only know that Christianity is true (and in a qualitatively superior way than that in which even non-Christians know it), but he is also assured of it. The Christian's assurance flows from the testimony of the Holy Spirit. It is not *only* that such testimony comes from such a reliable, utterly trustworthy source that we *ought to* trust it and that we *cannot* reasonably dismiss it. It is also that such assurance is the personal activity of an almighty God, who in giving his testimony is also dynamically involved in transforming the individual, reversing the noetic effects of sin in this fundamental area of our fallen beings so that his testimony is efficacious and irresistible. It is not just that the Christian cannot disbelieve<sup>vi</sup> without doing violence to the reality he knows to be true. Rather, he *cannot possibly not believe*. By God's sustaining grace alone, the Christian is able to persevere, because of Christ's finished, efficacious atonement for the Christian and God's manifested sovereign will of adopting us unconditionally as his children forever.<sup>vii</sup>

Therefore, even in the darkest night of doubt in the life of a Christian, he is not able to "disbelieve" because his believing (not merely his belief but the continued action or state itself) does not depend on himself but on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is why in the middle of the spiritual battle the Christian can cry to his covenant Lord, "Say to my soul, 'I am your salvation'" (Ps. 35:3). The fact that the regenerated believer struggles with doubt is evidence of the new life into which he has been ushered by grace through faith. Doubt in spiritual matters is not a foe for the nonbeliever because both are on the same side of the war. Just as faith and obedience to the Lord are marks of the believer, unbelief and disobedience to the Lord are marks of his enemies. Therefore, when doubt and disobedience appear or assault the life of a Christian, it is always as his enemies, and that is what causes distress in him.

Cornelius Van Til wrote that “presupposition is the best proof.”<sup>viii</sup> I do agree with the fact that presupposition is a proof, an evidence to be sure. But it cannot be regarded as the best. John Calvin got it right when he wrote:

Yet, they who strive to build up firm faith in Scripture through disputation are doing things backwards. For my part, although I do not excel either in great dexterity or eloquence, if I were struggling against the most crafty sort of despisers of God, who seek to appear shrewd and witty in disparaging Scripture, I am confident it would not be difficult for me to silence their clamorous voices. And if it were a useful labor to refute their cavils, I would with no great trouble shatter the boasts they mutter in their lurking places. But even if anyone clears God’s Sacred Word from man’s evil speaking, he will not at once imprint upon the certainty which piety requires. Since for unbelieving men religion seems to stand by opinion alone, they, in order not to believe anything foolishly or lightly, both wish and demand rational proof that Moses and the prophets spoke divinely. But I reply the testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason.<sup>ix</sup>

As noted earlier in a footnote, what has been said so far is a thesis actually endorsed by people (both Reformed and non-Reformed) who would not call themselves (or would not be called) presuppositionalists. By way of example:

- Alister E. McGrath boldly reminds his readers that apologetics “does not itself create that faith... An authentically Christian apologetic ... is aware of its limitations and rigorously upholds the central Christian insight that is none other than God himself who creates justifying faith.”<sup>x</sup>
- R. C. Sproul has said in one of his radio broadcasts<sup>xi</sup> that although he is able to go through all the classical arguments for the existence of God, he knows that in his heart that the non-believer already knows there is a God. In fact, John Frame has written that he is “happy to welcome R. C. Sproul as an honorary presuppositionalist.”<sup>xii</sup>
- Thomas Aquinas “appears to allow that the propositions of faith may be taken for granted.”<sup>xiii</sup> Thus comments Paul Helm after quoting the following words from the *Doctor Angelicus*: “There is nothing to stop a man accepting on faith some truth which he personally cannot demonstrate, even if that truth in itself is such that demonstration could make it evident.”<sup>xiv</sup>
- The “men of Princeton”. In direct reference to Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, and explicitly appealing to them in the work cited, Cornelius Van Til acknowledges that this presuppositional approach is “employed by both the men of Princeton and of Amsterdam.”<sup>xv</sup>
- William Lane Craig, in assessing the question “How do I know Christianity is true?” presents the following view which, with one exception, follows the Reformed tradition:

“May I suggest that, fundamentally, the way we know Christianity to be true is by the self-authenticating witness of God’s Holy Spirit? Now what do I mean by that? I mean that the experience of the Holy Spirit is veridical and unmistakable (though not necessarily irresistible or indubitable)<sup>xvi</sup> for him who has it; that such a person does not need supplementary arguments or evidence in order to know and to know with confidence that he is in fact experiencing the Spirit of God; that such experience does not function in this case as a premise in any argument from religious experience to God, but rather is the immediate experiencing of God himself; that in certain contexts the experience of the Holy Spirit will imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion, such as “God exists,” “I am condemned by God,” “I am reconciled to God,” “Christ lives in me,” and so forth; that such an experience provides one not only with a subjective assurance of Christianity’s truth, but with objective knowledge of that truth; and that arguments and evidence incompatible with that truth are overwhelmed by the experience of the Holy Spirit from him who attends fully to it. It seems to me that the [New Testament] teaches such a view with respect to both the believer and the unbeliever alike.<sup>xvii</sup>

If there is such an agreement around this fundamental thesis of presuppositional apologetics, why is it that these authors are still labeled (either by themselves or by others) as non-presuppositionalists or as “evidentialists”? The answer varies from case to case, yet there seems to be a further thesis (or a set or “package” of related theses) in the presuppositional camp (in addition to the above-mentioned) that separates it from the so-called evidentialists. Moreover, this is the point where even presuppositional apologists find divides among themselves. Broadly speaking, the disagreement seems to be around theses such as: the so-called “autonomy” of the so-called “human reason” (Van Tillianism); the validity of natural revelation *and* a consequent natural theology (“classical” apologetics); the “subsidiary” or “ministerial” use of reason (evidentialism);<sup>xviii</sup> the “Reformed objection to natural theology” or the objection to narrow foundationalism/evidentialism (Reformed epistemology).<sup>xix</sup>

Being aware of the danger of incurring in a shallow oversimplification by trying to encompass the issues behind the above mentioned theses, the question seems to be, *grosso modo*: What is the “valid” “manner” in which the human mind<sup>xx</sup> “processes” the set of propositions that constitutes the Christian belief?<sup>xxi</sup> The common denominator of the presuppositional response to that question is characterized (again, *grosso modo*) by reservations (in different ways, for different reasons, and in different degrees) with regards to the role and value that evidence has for the valid establishment of the set of beliefs that conform the Christian faith.

As Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, “Reformed or Calvinist thinkers have had important things to say on these topics and... their fundamental insights here are correct.” Yet one must also further confess with him that: “What they say, however, has been for the most part unclear, ill-focused, and unduly inexplicit.”<sup>xxii</sup> Thus, Alvin Plantinga has made a great service to Reformed thought and to the Christian Church in general, clarifying the terms of the discussion and focusing the issues to be addressed. Furthermore, one of Plantinga’s primary contributions in this area (which directly touches

the question of the “starting point”) has been his refutation of narrow foundationalism and the subsequent affirmation of the proper basicity of certain religious beliefs. This contribution has liberated the Christian believer from the tyrannical burden of the proof that evidentialism used to put on him.<sup>xxiii</sup> Yet the issue remains as to what is the role and use, if any, of evidence.

### III. BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF THE TASK OF APOLOGETICS.

Before addressing this subject, it is necessary to understand that strictly speaking apologetics is not a separate theological task.<sup>xxiv</sup> Every task, aspect and stage of any theological endeavor is in a sense apologetic or has an apologetic dimension. From the identification of the authoritative Scriptures (the question of the canon) to the proper understanding and interpretation of a particular verse, truth is what is at stake – the establishment, understanding, defense and advancement of truth.

It has been customary to appeal to 1 Peter 3:15 as the biblical support or “charter” for the task of apologetics. However, such a reading seems to go way beyond the authorial intent to the original audience. There is, to be sure, some relationship in the fact that giving reason or defending “the hope” that is in us is part of the theological endeavor, and therefore that it has an apologetic dimension to it. Nevertheless, it would require a highly questionable leap to bridge the gap between an encouragement to give reason of our eschatological hope in midst of persecution, and the fuller and broader task of apologetics.

This is, by the way, an example of the excesses and abuses we can incur if we adopt a method that tries to *deduct* everything directly and exclusively from explicit passages of the Scriptures.<sup>xxv</sup> Such an attitude not only neglects such doctrines as common grace and general revelation, but also leads the Christian to force into the biblical texts meanings and interpretations that are not there, however reasonable and consistent with the biblical message they might be. In fact, a strictly deductive method from the Bible is self-refuting, since the proposition “All knowledge concerning the Christian faith must be directly deduced from an explicit passage of Scripture” cannot be directly deduced from an explicit passage of Scripture – lest, once again, the interpreter forces such a meaning into a particular Bible verse.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Nevertheless, the above does not mean that there is no explicit biblical warrant for the task of apologetics. Having said that apologetics is not a separate, special or isolated task, but part of the whole “theological” endeavor (in its broadest sense), we are able to place it within the whole framework of redemptive history. There is much that could be said on this subject, but I will focus my attention on the development of the biblical theme of “holy war.”

Immediately after the fall (Gen. 3:15), God himself portrayed human history in the context of an enmity or warfare going on between two “seeds,” families, or “kingdoms.” Borrowing Augustine’s words, it is the city of God against the city of man:

I classify the human race into two branches: the one consists of those who live by human standards, the other consists of those who live according to God's will. I also call these two classes the two cities, speaking allegorically. By two cities I mean two societies of human beings, one of which is predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil.<sup>xxvii</sup>

This theme is pervasive throughout all Scripture.<sup>xxviii</sup> This enmity or warfare is represented or manifested in different ways according to the peculiar characteristics of each stage of redemptive history – from the mere physical survival of the “seed of the woman” (God's family) in Genesis 4, to the consummation of the kingdom of God.

One such stage, which covers a long and important span of time in the Old Testament narratives, is the conquest of the land of Canaan and the consolidation of the Davidic kingdom. Throughout this period, physical war is present as a means by which the Lord overcomes the city of man and makes himself known to all the earth. However, after the reign of king Solomon and the beginning of the decadence of Israel leading to the captivity, there is a switch in the theme of holy war:<sup>xxix</sup> in the late Monarchy (750-586 BC)<sup>xxx</sup> and following, the nations will know that Yahweh is God largely through prophecy.<sup>xxxi</sup> During this period, prophecy becomes the major mode of validation. Yahweh wages war against the apostate Israel and against the nations through prophets,<sup>xxxii</sup> but he also brings salvation through prophets.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Holy war is now a war of words, the war of the Word of God. The climax of this switch in redemptive history is the future ideal king, the Messiah:

He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
And with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

The Lord Jesus Christ started his ministry announcing the coming of the kingdom. His original audience expected a messianic warrior king. The Lord Jesus did not alter this idea, but focused it in terms of the preaching of the good news of the kingdom. Once the kingdom had been inaugurated, the apostle Paul was able to extend the messianic prophecy of the messenger of glad tidings (Isa. 52:7, notice the singular) to the whole church (Rom. 10:15, notice the plural), the City of God, as representatives, as the army, of the warrior king. Holy war is fought in this present stage of the redemptive history through the preaching of the Word of God. Yahweh as warrior gives gifted men for spiritual battle, not for military battle (Eph. 4; Rom. 12; 1 Cor. 12-14). The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17; see also Rev. 19:15).

The Word of God was *often*, in and of itself in its original delivery to its primary audiences, a polemic against worldviews that were contending with God's truth. There we find an offensive character of God's special revelation and its preaching against contending views of life, history, salvation, God, and even religion, religious expectations, and religious interpretations or forms of worship (even within God's covenant community). Furthermore, God's special revelation always<sup>xxxv</sup> has an affirmative character in establishing truths that are beyond the reach of the human noetic capacities. As for the task of establishing the truth, the Word of God is self-attesting.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

In summary, the Word of God and its preaching are aimed to establish truth and to controvert falsity. Both in establishing truth and in rebuking falsity, special revelation often points to truths already revealed and held by its audience through general revelation.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Finally, due to its progressive/organic nature, later deliveries of special revelation often elaborate further, interpret, expand and clarify themes and teachings from earlier stages.

<sup>i</sup> One of the outcomes of this absurdity is the disproportion that exists between the many books that discuss, for Christians, how to do apologetics, and the few books that actually do apologetics directly addressing unbelief.

<sup>ii</sup> There are various connotations for the term “evidentialism.” In the broad philosophical camp, it refers to the claim that one does not have an epistemic right to his beliefs unless they are supported by evidence. This view is also known as narrow foundationalism (cfr. Ronald H. Nash, *Faith & Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988; chapters 5 and 6). In Christian apologetics the use of the term is more loose. In this sense, an “evidentialist” is someone who relies more on evidence, though not necessarily because he endorses (at least not fully) the foundationalist view.

<sup>iii</sup> Presuppositional apologists are also divided among themselves to the extent that some Van Tillians (one of the presuppositional schools) would charge non-Van Tillians as being evidentialists.

<sup>iv</sup> By the word “evidence” I refer to both of Plantinga’s kinds of evidence: 1) propositional evidence (argument); and 2) the evidence provided by direct experience. Cf. Nash, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>v</sup> As it will be elaborated below, many of those who do not claim to be “presuppositionalists” (maybe because they have in mind a particular brand that comes in a package deal with other theses), would hold the same contention.

<sup>vi</sup> As it will be noted below, I distinguish between doubting and disbelieving. The first, I contend is possible for the Christian (as a trial, temptation or infirmity), but the second is *not*.

<sup>vii</sup> Romans 8:14-16.

<sup>viii</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974; p. 3.

<sup>ix</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, bk. I, ch. 7, 4 (p. 79) – emphasis added.

<sup>x</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God & Other Modern Myths*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993; p. 52.

<sup>xi</sup> Aired on a Sunday afternoon, spring 1999.

<sup>xii</sup> John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994; p. 6n.

<sup>xiii</sup> Paul Helm, *Faith and Understanding*, Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997; pp. 4-5.

<sup>xiv</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1ae 2, 2.

<sup>xv</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, class syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1954; pp. 8-9. The “men of Amsterdam” refers obviously to Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper.

<sup>xvi</sup> This is the one thing that prevents Craig’s view from being welcome without reservations as Reformed. It is not clear, however, what he means. As noted at the end of the quote (and as it is further elaborated in the pages that follow it), Craig is talking about the witness of the Holy Spirit to both the believer and the non-believer. Reformed thought would make it clear that in fact there are two kinds or approaches of the Holy Spirit to humanity depending on God’s unconditional election. We would want to be very careful in the choice of language to make it clear that God’s witness for salvation is actually a *call*, and it is meant to be irresistible, as it *actually* is. On the other hand, the witness to the reprobate is never intended to produce faith, repentance and perseverance. The fact that the non-believer does not surrender in repentance and faith to a witness that is not aimed to that effect does not affect at all the doctrine of irresistible grace or efficacious call for the elect. In each case the witness of the Holy Spirit accomplishes what he has willed to accomplish, according to God’s good pleasure (Eph. 1:11).

<sup>xvii</sup> William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, Wheaton, ILL: Crossway Books, 1994; pp. 31-32.

<sup>xviii</sup> Cf. Craig, op. cit., p. 36ff.

<sup>xix</sup> Cf. Alvin Plantinga, “Reason and Belief in God”, in *Faith and Rationality*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979; p. 16-17.

<sup>xx</sup> What I call the human mind is what many people (either ambiguously or mistakenly) call “human reason.” If one is to be precise, there is no such a thing as “human reason.” There is “human reasoning” or “human thought,” which is the way (fallible and limited) in which the human mind uses or grasps reason. Cf. C. S. Lewis “*De Futilitate*” in *Christian Reflections*, Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967; pp. 68-70; and Ronald H. Nash, *Life Ultimate Questions*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999; pp. 236-238; idem, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982.

<sup>xxi</sup> It is obvious that each concept implicit in the statement is by itself object of debate. It is also obvious that there are a number of biblical doctrines involved that need to be systematized, such as: the post-lapsarian state of the *Imago Dei*; general revelation and special revelation; common grace; *sola Scriptura*; the status of reason, and even the definition or understanding of its nature; etc.

<sup>xxii</sup> Plantinga, “Reason and...”, op. cit., p. 16. It is undeniable that certain Reformed schools have elevated ambiguity and lack of precision to the status of a theological virtue, which indeed does a very poor service to the cause of Reformed theology and of the Christian faith.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Cf. Nash, *Faith...*, op. cit., (chapters 5-6).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Its distinction as a branch of theology is just functional, for its study, but not due to a different nature.

<sup>xxv</sup> The allegation is often made that such an approach is the necessary consequence of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, but that is an inadequate understanding of such doctrine.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Three further problems with this approach are (at least) that: i) the argument incurs in a *petitio principii*; ii) it neglects the doctrine of the perspicuity of the Scriptures, that is, that not all things are as clearly revealed in the Scripture in the same way in which “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation” are (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I/vii); iii) taken to its ultimate consequences, it leads to conclusions quite departed from actually explicit teachings (consider Theonomy, for example). In this last instance, by way of an inductive method we are able to realize that there is something wrong with the deductive methodology and the basic presupposition from which the conclusion is inferred.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XV. 1. Cited in Michael Glodo, “Tale of Two Kingdoms” in *Modern Reformation*, September/October, 1994; pp. 17-20.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Cf. Glodo, op. cit.

<sup>xxix</sup> For the insights presented hereby, I am relying on Dr. Bruce K. Waltke’s courses on “Old Testament Biblical Theology” and “Judges through Poets,” especially on Lecture 12, Parts VI-IX, of the first course mentioned: “Yahweh as Deliverer and Warrior” (class syllabi). Dr. Waltke makes reference to Tremper Longman, III & Daniel G. Reid, *God is a Warrior*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.

<sup>xxx</sup> 2 Kings, Amos, Hosea, Jonah, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Jeremiah 1:4-9; Ezekiel 6:7,10,13; 25:17; 26:6; 28:22,23,24 (+ 50 times).

<sup>xxxii</sup> See oracles against nations: Isaiah 13-27; Jeremiah 46-51; Ezekiel 25-32; Nahum.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Jonah.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Isaiah 11:4.

<sup>xxxv</sup> With this often/always distinction, I mean to say that the offensive side is a subset since such polemics are in and of themselves affirmations of the truth anyway.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> The clear articulation of this doctrine is an important contribution of the historic Reformed confessions such as the Belgic Confession (Article 5) and the Westminster Larger Catechism (Question 4). It is also to be remarked that, as Herman N. Ridderbos explains, “*Corresponding to this objective principle of self-attestation of Scripture, from its inception Reformed theology has expressly distinguished the subjective principle of the testimonium Spiritus Sancti.*” (*Redemptive History and the New Testament Scriptures*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1988; p. 9.)

<sup>xxxvii</sup> A remarkable case, by way of example, is the book of Proverbs. Most conservative scholars recognize that some of the canonical proverbs have their origin in extra-biblical traditions inspiredly taken (claimed) and adapted to the Israelite worldview. Cf. Derek Kidner, *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature: The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job & Ecclesiastes*, Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 1985 (chapter 3). I also rely on Dr. Bruce K. Waltke’s course syllabus “Judges to Poets”. In all this, it must be stressed that general revelation is no less a God-given revelation than special revelation, its differences are to be found in the contents and aims of each one.