

Presuppositional Apologetics: An Introduction

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Part 2 of 2: “Fall and Redemption” and “Summary and Conclusion”

A. Sin, Grace, and Knowledge

The Bible teaches that we are not only God’s creatures, but also sinners (Rom. 3:23). Sin distorts all areas of human life (Gen. 6:5; Rom. 3:10-18); therefore it affects our knowledge of God in important ways. We have already discussed the contrast between living by God’s Word and living by mere human wisdom. Scripture teaches that many, sadly, make the latter choice, because of sin within them.

Paul in Romans 1 teaches that God has clearly revealed himself to all persons by means of the created world. This revelation includes God’s divine nature (verse 20), his wrath against sin (18), his moral requirements (32). That clear revelation leaves everyone without excuse for their sin (20). Indeed, because of that revelation, even those without the Scriptures can be said to “know” God (21). But these sinful people “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God” (28). They “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (18). They “exchanged” the glory of God for that of idols (23), his truth for a lie (25). Their hearts were darkened (21). The result of this is moral degradation, the worst forms of sinful behavior (24-32).

This is the condition of all human beings apart from God’s grace. Sin affects their thinking as well as the rest of their behavior. The point is not just that they reject the gospel. They reject the very idea of bowing before a revelation of God. They reject the very standards of truth by which the gospel is validated. Their minds are darkened (1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:18). Like Eve in Genesis 3, they reject God’s Word in order to make their decisions autonomously.

The unbeliever,¹ then, in alliance with Satan, puts up massive resistance against God’s Word. Paul says, “The natural man (i.e., the unbeliever) does not

¹ I will in this paper present apologetics as a debate between “believer” and “unbeliever.” I realize, of course, that apologetics is often useful for believers as well, to edify and to ease continuing doubts. But for the sake of simplicity, I will

receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). Scripture presents this resistance sometimes as the sinner’s choice, sometimes as Satan blinding him: “But if our gospel is hid, it is hid to them that are lost, in whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them” (2 Cor. 4:3ff.).

Jesus interrupted Nicodemus, who wanted to discuss theology with him, by saying, “Unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). What a put-down for Nicodemus, “the teacher of Israel” (John 3:10)! Nicodemus thought that he knew a lot about the kingdom of God; but he knew nothing. He could not even see. He needed the new birth, the Holy Spirit (John 3:5-8), the salvation Jesus came to bring. And he needed new presuppositions. Elsewhere in Scripture, we learn that redemption brings a new knowledge of God. Fallen man wants to think autonomously, subject only to his own criteria of truth, free to ignore those of God. But God’s grace takes away our bondage to autonomous ways of thinking and enables us instead to think according to God’s Word (Jer. 31:31ff.; Matt. 11:25-28; John 17:3; 1 Cor. 2:6-16; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 1:9; Col. 1:9ff.; 3:10; 2 Tim. 2:25; 2 Pet. 1:2ff.; 3:18; 1 John 4:7).² The Holy Spirit illumines our minds to know the truth (1 Cor. 2:12ff.; 2 Cor. 4:6; Eph. 1:17ff.; Heb. 6:4; 10:32; 1 Thess. 1:5). The fear of the Lord leads to knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 1:7; parallels).

The sources of redemptive knowledge are the Word and Spirit of God. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the preaching of Christ” (Rom. 10:17). It is through those special Words, given by the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:13). The Spirit empowers the Word to drive it home to our hearts (1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thess. 1:5; cf. John 8:31ff.; 17:17; 2 Cor. 4:2ff.; Col. 2:3; 3:16; 2 Tim. 3:15; James 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:23; etc.).

We should not conclude from this teaching that the unbeliever has no knowledge of the truth at all. That would contradict Rom. 1:18-21. They do “know

write here as if our apologetic arguments were exclusively directed toward unbelievers. Not everything I say will pertain to that other kind of apologetics which deals pastorally with believers, but some of it will. That latter kind of apologetics, it should be remembered, deals with the unbelief remaining within the believer.

² Again, I apologize for deluging the reader with “proof texts.” See my DKG, especially 1-49, for some analysis of their teaching. I do think, however, that for the most part these texts speak for themselves without commentary, at least to most high school graduates. On “proof texts,” see *ibid.*, 197.

God!" Nor should we falsely conclude, from the term translated "repress" by the NIV in verse 18, that their knowledge of God is always subconscious or unconscious. Rather, Scripture often represents unbelievers, even devils, being conscious of the truth and willing to affirm it (for their sinful purposes, of course) (Matt. 23:3ff.; Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34; 8:28; John 3:2; Acts 16:17; James 2:19). What happens, rather, is that although they know God, they turn against him and do whatever they can to suppress the effects of the truth in themselves and in the world. Sometimes they deny it with their lips; other times, like the Pharisees, they confess it with their lips while denying it in their hearts and actions.

Nor should we conclude that God's grace prevents the believer from any rebellion against the truth. What grace does is to break the *dominion* of sin (Rom. 6:14); it does not banish the presence of sin until the final day (Rev. 21:1-8,27). For the present, believers still sin (1 John 1:8-10), and therefore they turn against God's Word. But by redemption we have the means to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

B. Apologetic Implications

1. Again: No Neutrality

These biblical teachings reinforce the metaphor of the paranoid which I discussed earlier. The unbeliever, like the paranoid, has a false world view which he is trying with all his might to promulgate and defend. Yet, he is not ignorant of the truth. As in the illustration we hoped that the paranoid might be, at some level of his consciousness, in touch with reality, so Scripture assures us that the unbeliever *is* in touch with reality. He knows God, though he seeks to repress that knowledge.

There is something enormously irrational about the unbeliever's whole enterprise. Like Satan, he knows God, yet he disowns him. He knows that his actions deserve death (Rom. 1:32), yet he does them anyway. He knows that rebellion against God is doomed, yet he rebels anyway. There is a craziness about sin. In saying that I do not at all mean to reduce the unbeliever's responsibility, as might be suggested by the modern medical model of "mental illness." The craziness is chosen; it is the unbeliever's responsibility. He would rather live in a dream world, a world of his own creation, than to acknowledge God as Lord. Therefore he contends against reality. As apologists, we must seek to bring him back.

Again, the apologist must not adopt the unbeliever's standards.³ How can we accept his craziness? How can we rescue him from quicksand if we are caught up in it too? His standards, indeed, are themselves sin. To accept them would be to renounce the Lordship of Christ.

Nor do we dare to seek "neutrality." There is none. Paul asks, "What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor. 6:14ff.). We are either for Christ or against him; no one is "unbiased" (Matt. 12:30).

Through the history of apologetics, it has been common for Christians to claim some kind of neutral ground, some criteria or standards that both believer and unbeliever can accept without compromising their systems. There are, of course, usually some propositions that both believer and unbeliever can agree to. And those kinds of agreements are apologetically useful. Indeed, as we indicated earlier, some unbelievers, like the devils, may even confess that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. But we mislead the unbeliever if we tell him that we are using the same standards of truth, rationality, and knowledge as he. To tell him that is misleading even if he is willing to do lip-service to scriptural standards. For his grand passion, his basic commitment, is to attack and undermine the truth as the Christian understands it.

2. The Unbeliever's Need

From the biblical evidence, we can expect that the unbelievers to whom we witness both know God and seek to suppress the truth. Their primary need is not to know that God exists, although various kinds of argumentation may be useful to remind them that they know that.

Positively, what does the unbeliever need? (a) He needs the Word of God. The Word is what brings faith. I am not saying that the apologist should merely read Scripture to the unbeliever, though there is surely a place for that. The important thing is that he present the authentic message of the gospel, without compromise. He should not pretty it up as is so often done; sin must be presented in all its ugliness, the supernatural in all its offensiveness to "modern man," the cross as a blood sacrifice, faith as a matter of life or death, the Lordship of Christ

³ I am speaking here of the standards he *seeks* to promote. Of course, he may, like the Pharisees, hypocritically confess a biblical, theistic standard. That, of course, we may and must agree with; and we must call such unbelievers to give heart allegiance to those standards, in place of lip-service.

with all its intrusive demands. All of that, of course, alongside the joyful, good-news promises of God.

In presenting the Word, we must *apply* it to the unbeliever's situation. Different unbelievers have different sorts of problems with Christianity: the existence of God, the problem of evil, the ethical demands of Scripture, or whatever. We must be prepared to deal with those as they appear, giving scriptural answers. By "scriptural answers," I don't mean necessarily answers that are explicitly found on the pages of Scripture. To apply Scripture to present-day situations, we must know something about the present-day situations. Indeed, we may generalize: to apply Scripture, we must have some extra-scriptural knowledge. A "scriptural answer" to the problems of nuclear weapons must include some knowledge about such weapons.

The Word itself is meaningless unless it is applicable to human questions and needs. "Presenting" the Word to another person (as opposed to merely reading it to him) is applying it, using it to address human needs. To "present the Word," then, is to present a scriptural perspective on human experience.

Such a presentation of the Word, then, may include many sorts of arguments and evidences. Presuppositionalists are often accused of rejecting the use of evidence. This simply is not so.⁴ Presuppositionalism does not involve any general prejudice against the use of extra-biblical data; such prejudice is impossible in any apologetic which seeks to address current issues. We do not reject the use of evidences, even the use of theistic proofs. We only insist that these be *scriptural* arguments — i.e. arguments which appeal to scriptural criteria.

Often, indeed, presenting evidence is precisely the right thing to do. If someone asks what evidence there is for Jesus' resurrection, it is quite right to appeal to the "standard" arguments: the reports of resurrection appearances, the evidence for the empty tomb, the unlikelihood of alternative explanations, etc. This might be all our inquirer needs! Perhaps the Spirit will use this presentation to overcome his resistance to the gospel. On the other hand, perhaps this

⁴ See my DKG, 140-149, 352-4, Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961). Van Til approves of theistic arguments in many places: see his *The Defense of the Faith*, 120, 196, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 102ff., 114ff., 196, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 292, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 179ff., 190ff.

particular unbeliever will need something more. He may object (like David Hume) that any naturalistic explanation of the “evidence” would be superior to any supernatural explanation of it. At that point, we need to do more than present evidence; we need, rather, to present an epistemology, a philosophy of evidence. And that philosophy cannot be a Humean or Kantian or Bultmannian philosophy; it must be Christian, scriptural. At that point it becomes clear that even in presenting evidence we are not appealing to criteria which are neutral or acceptable to unbelief. Rather, we are appealing to God’s criteria, and our appeal to evidence is part of that. We are offering the unbeliever, as we offer the paranoid, a broadly circular argument which appeals to our own standards, not his.

It is therefore misleading to tell unbelievers (as many apologists do) that the evidence for Christianity is only “probable” as opposed to being “certain.” There are, of course, several kinds of certainty which pertain to beliefs: (1) psychological certainty, the absence of doubt; (2) logical certainty, the validity of an argument; (3) objective certainty, the soundness of an argument (true premises and valid logic). Since Christian argumentation is an application of the Word of God, it is, when done right, always certain in the second and third senses. But does it also warrant psychological certainty?

Yes: the evidence, evaluated in the light of a Christian epistemology, warrants psychological certainty, because its ultimate appeal is to the authoritative Word of God. We *ought* to be certain of the Word of God; indeed, the Word is our very criterion of certainty. We ought to regard it as more certain than anything else we know. For example: ultimately, the strongest evidence for the resurrection is that Scripture teaches it!⁵ And the other evidences for the resurrection (witnesses, arguments, etc.) which also come from the Bible presuppose Christian standards for evaluation. The resurrection, then, is certain because it is taught in God’s Word itself. Indeed, as part of God’s Word, it is the very standard of certainty; nothing is more certain.

So the presentation of evidence, done rightly, is itself a presentation of the Word of God. It is an application of the Word of God to the data of experience. Theistic arguments are another example. It is certainly reasonable to maintain

⁵ This is not a joke. I have often asked students what is Paul’s central *argument* for the truth of the resurrection in 1 Cor. 15. Because of their acquaintance with the modern evidentialist literature, they almost always give the wrong answer. Paul’s chief argument is not the witnesses (even the five hundred of verse 6), though that evidence is there and is certainly impressive. The correct answer: Paul says the Corinthians should believe in the resurrection because it is part of the apostolic *preaching*, part of God’s Word! See verses 1ff., 11ff., 14ff.

that such data as causality, purposiveness and morality indicate the reality of God. But an unbeliever may seek to avoid the force of such arguments by postulating an essentially irrational universe in which such “indications” are not to be trusted, or by insisting that *for him* the universe itself is a sufficient explanation of these data.⁶ At this point, the apologist must again talk about criteria of truth and rationality. And in that discussion, his Christian colors should inevitably be exposed.⁷

Another way of applying Scripture is to attack the non-Christian’s own ideas head-on. It is legitimate for Christians to expose unbelievers’ use of logical fallacies, self-contradictions, linguistic confusions, factual errors, and the like.⁸ This sort of argument is especially useful when it shows a spiritual motivation for the error: i.e. when it shows that the unbeliever embraces error as a means of escaping the truth. This type of argument, like the others, must presuppose scriptural criteria. When pressed, that is to say, we must be willing to confess that we seek logical consistency, e.g., not for its own sake, but because God wants us to image his own consistency (2 Tim. 2:13).

(b) The unbeliever’s second need: he must be brought to repentance and faith. As Calvin emphasized, it doesn’t matter much whether we win an argument, or whether we push the unbeliever to acknowledge the intellectual truth of the gospel.⁹ The goal of apologetics (for apologetics is nothing more than an aspect of evangelism) is conversion in the fullest sense. Of course, only the Holy Spirit can convert. But our witness, as the Spirit’s tool, must be in solidarity with the Spirit; we must seek what he seeks and say what he says.

Repentance means turning away from sin. Faith, the opposite side of repentance, is turning toward Christ. You can’t have one without the other. These are also needed in the area of human thought. The unbeliever must turn away from his rebellious autonomy and place himself, including his intellect, under the Lordship of Christ.

⁶ Van Til teaches that these two alternatives, which he calls “irrationalism” and “rationalism,” are found (together, but in tension) in every non-Christian philosophy. He is thus able to develop an insightful analysis of the whole history of philosophy, presenting it as the spiritual battle that it is.

⁷ And, again, we should stress that the Christian *form* of theistic argument is not merely probable, but certain. For on a Christian basis God is the indispensable foundation of all rational argument. Nothing can exist more certainly than he, for he is the standard of all certainty.

⁸ Again, note Van Til’s interesting approach, charging unbelieving thought with being both rationalistic and irrationalistic at the same time.

⁹ As, for example, in *Institutes* I, ii, 2 and I, v, 9.

This does not mean that every single inquirer must be confronted on the subject of his epistemology. Most people don't have a carefully worked out epistemology; most don't even know what the word means. They commit intellectual sins nonetheless; they fail to think and reason according to biblical standards. But when they come to Christ they repent of these as part of the package. Certainly we are not obliged to discuss every single sin specifically with every unbeliever, and so in some cases we are justified in omitting specific reference to intellectual sins.¹⁰ Yet at the same time we should not say or do anything to *obscure* the need for intellectual repentance. And that, I think, is what many apologists have done when they have claimed "neutrality" or "common ground." Such claims lead the unbeliever to think that he has no intellectual sins needing repentance, that he can go on thinking any way he likes, that he does not need to bring "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).¹¹

Although it is quite legitimate, as we've seen, for the apologist to use theistic arguments, evidence and so on, there are dangers to avoid in this area. It is possible to go on and on about facts, evidence and proofs in such a way as to mislead the unbeliever as to his true need. Even arguments in themselves legitimate (like those mentioned in (a) above) can in certain contexts be obstacles to true faith. For they can tend to flatter the unbeliever into thinking that God must conform to his standards. The unbeliever may think that he can come to faith without any radical redirection of his thinking, indeed, perhaps, even apart from grace.¹² It is vitally important, therefore, that the apologist be a self-conscious

¹⁰ Of course, with *some* unbelievers, especially those with some intellectual gifts and interests, it is good to raise specifically the issue of intellectual sin. Just as the rich young ruler needed to hear about the snares of wealth (Luke 18:23), so many people need especially to hear about the snares of "knowledge falsely so-called" (1 Tim. 6:20).

¹¹ Believers too often fail consistently to bring their thoughts captive to Christ. Thus many Christians today, badly taught from the outset about the demands of their Lord, are trying to live for Jesus while blithely accepting all sorts of anti-Christian ideas in school classrooms, entertainment and news media.

¹² Some presuppositionalists have accused "evidentialists" of teaching that people can come to Christ without grace or without the work of the Holy Spirit. There may be some evidentialists who hold such views (perhaps by pushing an Arminian theology to a Pelagian extreme), but most do not. Some evidentialists, like John H. Gerstner, are very self-conscious Calvinists. In general, I think that this criticism of evidentialism is unfair, and I do not join in it myself. Still, there are dangers that contrary to our intentions, we (whether presuppositionalists or evidentialists) might by our preoccupation with evidences mislead unbelievers into such errors.

evangelist, that he always have his eye on the goal. That goal is not to win an argument, but to bring another person to repentance and faith in Christ.

If we keep this goal in mind, other aspects of the apologetic task will also fit into place. For one thing, apologetics should be bathed in prayer; for only God can bring real fruit out of our presentations. For another, we can see that the best apologetic is often not an argument at all, but a demonstration of Christian love. Love is powerfully winsome. The success of Francis Schaeffer's L'Abri ministry is a case in point: Schaeffer spent much time in apologetic debate, but he and his family also loved people into the kingdom, showing them that God really made a difference. On the other hand, apologists who belittle people, who bully them into agreement, who express ungodly pride in their rationality, cleverness, piety, theological traditions and the like: these cannot expect the blessing of God on their work.¹³

The goal is salvation; apologetic argument is only one tool of many that God may choose to use. Apologetics is a servant-discipline. Apologetic argument is not, as it is sometimes presented, "the basis" of Christian faith.¹⁴ The Word of God is the basis. Apologetic argument is one way to apply that basis to certain problems people raise to excuse themselves from trusting Christ. It is not the only way even to deal with those problems. (Loving admonition often suffices.) Apologetic argument is one tool that is often useful, but it is important to keep it in its place, not to allow ourselves as apologists to be too puffed up with our own importance (see 1 Cor. 8:1-3).

Summary and Conclusion

That, at any rate, is the concept of apologetics that I would advocate. This apologetic takes seriously the biblical teaching of creation and redemption or, to put it differently, Scripture's affirmation that Christ is both lord and savior. As lord, he has the right to rule our thinking as well as every other aspect of life; we must presuppose his lordship in our apologetics and summon non-Christians to bring their thoughts captive to him. As savior, he remakes the human mind in his image and brings his people to repentance and faith. Apologetics must have that same goal; and thus the apologist must challenge the unbeliever to a radical change of thought and life, while modeling that new thought and life in his own words and actions.

¹³ Though God may sovereignly decide to use their witness anyway (Phil. 1:15-18)!

¹⁴ Here I agree enthusiastically with the "theistic foundationalism" of Wolterstorff and Plantinga.

This kind of apologetics can use many of the traditional apologetic methods and arguments, but it will take care to relate all these methods and arguments properly to the lordship of Christ and to his saving purposes. Thus the apologist will be sensitive to opportunities to present Christ as the foundation of all rationality (Col. 2:3), lord of the human mind, and to pursue his saving purposes in every apologetic encounter. Only thus will we succeed in doing apologetics to the glory of God.