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PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

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Stated and Defended

GREG L. BAHNSEN

Edited by Joel McDurmon

AMERICAN VISION PRESS
POWDER SPRINGS, GEORGIA

&

COVENANT MEDIA PRESS
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

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Copyright © 2008 *The American Vision, Inc*
Published jointly with *Covenant Media Press*

The American Vision, Inc.
3150 Florence Road
Powder Springs, Georgia 30127-5385
www.AmericanVision.org
1-800-628-9460

Covenant Media Press
8784 FM 226
Nacogdoches, Texas 75961
www.cmfnow.com

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Printed in the United States of America.

Cover design by Adam Stiles
Typesetting by Adam Stiles

ISBN10: 0-915815-55-9
ISBN13: 978-0-915815-55-5

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

BY JOEL MCDURMON

Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen (1948–1995) provided perhaps the clearest, most faithful, and most powerful advancement of Cornelius Van Til's presuppositional apologetics of anyone. This statement holds true both for Bahnsen's written scholarly work as well as his practical applications in both formal and informal debates and exchanges. Those knowledgeable of Van Til's "Copernican Revolution" in Christian apologetical method will understand the enormity of this compliment to Greg Bahnsen. Those not formerly introduced to Van Til or Bahnsen will understand shortly after beginning this volume—for this book presents the most clear, systematic, and rigorous statement and defense of Van Tillian presuppositional apologetics written to date.

This volume presents the *systematic* counterpart to Bahnsen's earlier publication, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*.¹ While that previous work included a broad and topical overview and explanation of Van Til's contribution—which, though highly organized according to an outline, and much more accessible than Van Til's own massive corpus of writing, still does not fully execute the *task* of a systematic work—this volume gets closer to an apolo-

1. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998).

getical version of “systematic theology,” as opposed to, say, “biblical theology.” Both approaches provide vital understanding, and now we have both.

As Morton Smith explains in his *Systematic Theology*, the task of systematic theology involves beginning with revelation, constructing the system, demonstrating and defending the truly biblical nature of the system, and lastly, examining critically all that has gone before.² If we can understand Bahnsen’s former *Analysis* as outlining a general system, we can receive this text as completing the rest of the systematic task. In this volume you will find the biblical and theoretical muscle behind the explanations given in the previous effort, the faithful defense, and the trenchant critical examination of alternative works and methods. Thus this work naturally compliments and expands the earlier *Analysis* (although, as you will see, Bahnsen actually wrote this later work years prior to the earlier published book).

What Was Lost Now Is Found

Besides the importance, rigor, and quality of this work, the book also has an amazing story behind it. Bahnsen originally began this work only to fill two chapters in a collaborative effort, *The Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, edited by Gary North in 1976.³ Bahnsen—as by all accounts he was wont to do—continued adding and revising the work. It outgrew the scope useful for the book, with the side effect of beginning to delay the publication. The publisher gave Greg an ultimatum: either submit his two articles within two weeks, or he would use another author (who had already submitted!) for the chapters. Greg complied, but at the necessary expense of setting aside the much lengthier and more detailed work he had already begun. Within two weeks Bahnsen supplied almost a hundred pages that became chapters 10 and 11—still necessary reading today!—in North’s phenomenal display of Van Til’s influence and importance.

2. See Morton H. Smith, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994), 1:22–24.

3. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1976).

Meanwhile, Bahnsen periodically returned to the “chapters” he originally began, which now approached a self-sustaining treatise. Over time he continued adding and revising, and at some point had the work typeset as a preliminary step for publication. When he received the “galley proofs” (20”-long typeset pages used for author’s review and editing), Greg continued revising towards what clearly promised to be his *magnum opus*—a work which contained a clear and thorough positive statement of the presuppositional method as well as a comparison of that method against other allegedly “presuppositional” systems and a defense against other non-presuppositional critics and rivals.

At this point, the most unexpected—and unfortunate—turn of events occurred. For some reason, unknown to everyone close to Bahnsen, the galleys were *lost*. Lost, as in disappeared. I can only imagine, in view of Bahnsen’s voluminous and varied output during this time (he taught seminary until 1979, pastored a church and Christian school after that, wrote articles and lessons for various media, generated hundreds of audio tapes, and regularly typed out twenty-page, *single-spaced* letters to critics and inquirers alike, among other things, plus a draining embroilment in controversy at Reformed Theological Seminary), that the *magnum opus* which took so much valuable time, yet had little direct financial support, gave way to his various other duties necessary to pay the bills. Whatever happened (and my speculation may not come even remotely close), the galleys *vanished* into the mists of a life in transition and remained lost until Bahnsen’s untimely passing in 1995.

Only by the amazing grace of God did that which was lost get found. After Bahnsen’s death—about sixteen years after his masterpiece-in-progress disappeared—the effort of cleaning out his offices solved the great mystery. The long-lost galleys and attendant materials—which Greg had apparently sealed in an envelope and mailed to his California office from Jackson, MS—had fallen behind one of thirty filing cabinets bulging with Bahnsen’s written, received, and clipped materials. Dusting off the cobwebs and inspecting the envelope, Covenant Media Foundation director Randy Booth conferred with Bahnsen’s mother, who helped discern the date of the package from the old address written on it. Having long-since heard rumors that Bahnsen had begun this work around the

time she mentioned, Randy put two and two together to get four hundred—over four hundred pages that is, once we would convert the galleys into standard pages.

Having the physical evidence that the publication began, Randy called the original publisher to inquire about the printing plates (essential for continuing the process!). Unfortunately, the original printer had long since destroyed them. Bahnsen had delayed so long, and further circumstances had extenuated that delay, the printer could no longer wait—he could not keep the valuable resources and materials tied up with an old lagging project when other orders demanded them. So the old plates no longer existed. In the absence of vital resources, the project remained filed away.

Less than a year ago the project arose as a subject of interest at American Vision. Hearing that Covenant Media had something of a “manuscript” unpublished, we began to talk. Upon receiving the galleys for our review, we realized that even though the printer destroyed the original plates, the advance of technology made it possible to convert the text to a digital format. After a quick scanning and conversion effort, I personally spent half of a week pouring over the text correcting scanning errors and other minor problems. Then I began the task of incorporating Bahnsen’s hand-written edits into the text from the scanned proofs—revising words, deleting sections, and inserting “new” materials he had prepared in manuscript. After this tedious work, we finally got the text into a modern typesetting program and began final editing.

I am so thankful and proud merely to be included in resurrecting this impressive work. Why our Lord delayed it and preserved it until now for publication He alone knows; but what was lost for thirty years, now is found. To help bring the clearest, most rigorous statement and defense of presuppositional apologetics—from perhaps Van Til’s most gifted disciple—brings American Vision and Covenant Media Foundation a great joy and sense of fulfillment.

About the Contents

To begin a few brief explanatory notes about this edition of Bahnsen’s *opus* I should note firstly that we have not included the entire contents in this first volume. We have good reasons for this. Bahnsen

appears to have planned the work, as earlier intimated, in three parts: 1) a positive statement, both biblical and philosophical, of the presuppositional method; 2) a critique of three other apologists who use the term “presuppositional,” in which Bahnsen shows their methods to fall short of the biblical presuppositional standard set by Van Til; and finally, 3) a critique of fully non-presuppositional proponents. Unfortunately, due to his self-imposed high standard of rigor and detail (and life circumstances), Bahnsen never completed the third section. Despite covering over two hundred manuscript pages, he only appears to have completed the first point in his outline for Part 3—covering three apologists under the heading “Positivists.” He left no further information for his outline.

As a result, this edition contains only the first two (completed) parts, leaving the third part for future editing and publication. We hope to involve other authors from the Van Til-Bahnsen tradition to generate and complete an outline which will encompass more of the major modern apologetical methods and authors and publish such in conjunction with Bahnsen’s existing material. The resulting second volume would complete Bahnsen’s work in a compilation meaningful for both its content and legacy.

Of the two parts that fill this volume, the reader will see Bahnsen at his most precise, exacting, and faithful in explaining and applying apologetical methodology. Part 1 explains the method and reasons for the method in an in-depth fashion, exegeting vital biblical passages throughout Chapter 2, and analyzing relevant philosophical and ethical ideas in Chapter 3. This section we have titled, “Presuppositional Apologetics Positively Stated,” as this appears to approximate Bahnsen’s intention.

Part 2 examines three well-known apologists who often used the term, and whom many people identified as “presuppositional.” Bahnsen contrasts them against the standard of Van Til’s presuppositional method and shows the many ways and instances in which they—despite all of their many positive contributions and aspects—depart from a thoroughly biblical presuppositional pattern. The names of Gordon Clark, Edward Carnell, and especially Francis Schaeffer, all find ready acknowledgement today for the most part. In critiquing such giants, Bahnsen shows clear awareness that the debate involved takes place between brothers in the faith—that this debate is an in-

tramural debate. Nevertheless, Bahnsen thoroughly and boldly criticizes their departures from biblical methodology and calls readers to recognize and implement a more consistent approach.

The analysis of Schaeffer, in particular, carries great importance here. Among the three, Schaeffer by far had the widest influence, and yet his apologetic has probably endured the least scrutinizing. With the exception of a paper and a letter by Van Til—little-known outside of a few specialists—Schaeffer has received almost no critique from a thoroughly presuppositional perspective. This book provides a needed silence-breaking—and some may conclude groundbreaking—assessment.

During his last wave of editing, Bahnsen removed a few substantial sections from the text. Whether he intended to exclude them permanently or move them to a different place in the work is not clear. Judging the content of these excisions to have some significance, and in the interest of the greater cause of apologetical learning, I have in determined to include them in this work. The reader will find these in Appendixes 1 thru 3. Keep in mind that Bahnsen may not have desired them to remain in his final edition.

One point of interest comes in the anticipated reaction from some followers of Gordon Clark. Since Bahnsen treated Clark first in the series, that critique appears as the most rigorous, most detailed, longest, and possibly (to some readers) the most merciless of the three. In reality, and as Bahnsen mentions, the three critiques piggy-back on one another so that the author does not repeat himself in dealing with the same issues multiple times. What he explicates at length when dealing with Clark applies also to the same ideas in the others as well, and thus the analyses balance in actuality.

Fans of Clark will remember that Van Til—Bahnsen's mentor—entangled with Dr. Clark in at least one major (and heated) intellectual disagreement, and thus may encounter the temptation to see Bahnsen's detailed critique as a settling of old scores. I do not believe this enters the picture at all here. Considering the amount of criticism that Clark encountered in his lifetime—just review the work which Bahnsen references often, *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*,⁴ and see Clark's interaction with many scholars from various angles—I

4. Ronald H. Nash, ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1968).

suspect Bahnsen simply wished to provide a definitive critique from his presuppositional viewpoint, which former works appeared to him not to include. With this in mind, however, it is a shame that the foremost exponent of Dr. Clark's thought, John Robbins, passed away in August, 2008, and thus will not be able to interact with this critique. It might have been helpful to hear his comments.

Nevertheless, for those who succumb to popular images that some promote about Bahnsen, I wish to offer the next paragraphs. Due to his rigorous, machine-like precision in debate, and his relentless pursuit of accuracy in scholarship, some people have painted Bahnsen with the undue image of a merciless critic more bent on tearing down opponents than having a heart for ministry. Perhaps he did both, but the following will help dispel the charge of heartlessness as it shows the importance of Reformed theology, the reliance on the Holy Spirit, and the care for subtle rewording or editing with which Greg operated.

The Editorial Window

Entering the editing process at this stage provides some added benefits to those interested in the personality and character of the author. The perspective of the editor who gets to see the author's mind and heart at work in revising his own words and ideas compares, analogously at least, to that of a pastor hearing private confession. He shares in keen and touching insights that others do not, presides over personal decisions that others do not, and he sees a side of the author that many readers may never know (and would almost certainly not know based on popular lore). The editor coming to a work already self-edited by the author, similarly watches that author reassess, correct, improve himself where others do not. Where these little "confessions" are favorable (and Bahnsen's almost always are), sharing them publically, especially posthumously, can only inspire and encourage other apologists and scholars. Bahnsen would have certainly approved of such openness, especially towards furthering the quality of Christian scholarship.

The process of self-editing requires a tremendous amount of humility, as well as a knowledge sensitive of the intended audience. I believe Greg illustrates both in some of the following changes.

A first example involves a paragraph which he removed completely from Chapter 3, Article 7. It reads,

Any argument between an intelligent, self-conscious unbeliever and an intelligent, self-conscious Christian must eventually reduce to the appeal of ultimate, but diverse, presuppositions. A critical analysis of their respective language and logic would strip their arguments bare and reveal this fact. But the apologetic appeal will not always end in a deadlocked antithesis between the non-Christian and Christian. The Holy Spirit *does* grant the ability for the unbeliever to repent and believe in Jesus Christ, All that the Father has given to the Son *will* definitely come to Him (John 6:37).

Exactly why Bahnsen wanted this removed I cannot tell. It does seem to introduce too much of a dogmatically theological position into his “philosophical reflections” chapter, and perhaps he wished to avoid the risk of such a criticism, as insignificant as such a risk might be. The passage does show, however, how closely the Van Til-Bahnsen apologetic involves Reformed theology, the work of the Holy Spirit in apologetics, and a belief in predestination. This same focus echoes in another passage Bahnsen excised later from the same article:

We do not present Christianity as a “hypothesis” to be verified, and we are repulsed by the idea of presenting men with a “probability” to worship. Our apologetic must presuppose the authority and truth of Christ’s Word in Scripture, casting down all reasoning that exalts itself against God. We must use the tools supplied by the Holy Spirit, not the devices of sin. We must seriously recognize that the sinner’s problem in rejecting the Bible is *ethical, not intellectual*. Only regeneration can bring a man to belief, and apologetic argument must never presume to preempt or in any way take the place of regeneration.

I would have liked to have seen Bahnsen deal more with the relationship between apologetics and regeneration, or between apologetics and evangelism, within this work.⁵ Nevertheless, the inclusion of this

5. As he did, for example, in his article, “Apologetics and Evangelism,”

relationship stands out here, and the reliance on the Holy Spirit rather than personal debating ability highlights Bahnsen's presuppositional method. I also believe that the obvious Calvinism of the method presents a big obstacle to many of those who oppose it, but that matter belongs to another discussion.⁶

While many early on painted Bahnsen with a reputation as a cold logician cutting through opponents' arguments with the razor of Reformed dogma, this portrayal does not correlate with the self-corrections evident in this project. The process of editing this work finds him correcting his early draft in order to curb and soften some claims that would have come across too harshly. For example, he had originally written in Chapter 3, Article 7, "Since Scripture speaks of God's unmistakable existence as absolutely certain and known to all men, it would be a *denial of biblical faith* to suppose His probable existence or to work toward proving Him to exist as such. Scripture does not present, nor do we worship, a probability." Upon review, however, he realized that the phrase "a denial of biblical faith" states the case too strongly, and thus he revised it to read "a departure from truth." Bahnsen certainly did not wish to argue for the apostasy of his intramural opponents (he in fact considered those apologists who opposed his method as yet part of a "united defense of the faith," as he writes in the last paragraph of Chapter 1), but rather he intended to convey that they simply interpreted the Bible incorrectly. To catch such a comment and to revise it in one's own writing displays no small amount of sensitivity and willing humility.

Bahnsen's excising of the following sentences from the same section reveals the same heart a work:

The very *question* of whether God might exist or Scripture might be true is tantamount to a denial of what Scripture says about God's inescapably clear and authoritative revelation. To attempt an apologetic that takes an (allegedly) impartial

Synapse 3 (Fall, 1974); available online at <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA013.htm> (accessed March 3, 2009).

6. For illustrating the coherence and consistency of different theological commitments versus differing apologetic methods, the best place to start is Van Til's original *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th Ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1955] 2008).

starting point and method is to radically deny the existence of the Christian God as described in His nature and activities by Scripture.

I don't know if he removed this due to eventually disagreeing with it, seeing it as unnecessary, judging it too strongly stated, or for some other reason. I personally tend to believe the statement in theory, though the inclusion of such in practice might have alienated many fellow apologists, unnecessarily I think. Once again we have an argument about apologetical method hinging on a theological debate, in this case (considering the context from which Bahnsen cut it), the analogous debate about Eve's sin: did she sin when she *ate*, or already in her heart when she first *desired to eat*. The Reformed view would, by and large, argue that Eve sinned at the very moment she questioned in her heart God's revelation about the tree. The eating just outwardly manifested her sin, and certainly constituted sin in itself as well; but in truth, even before she touched the fruit she had committed the sin. At any rate, I believe Bahnsen wished to avoid the perception of contrasting fellow-believers' positions so antithetically as "a denial of what Scripture says," and, "radically deny the existence of the Christian God," even though these descriptions bear much truth in the context.

In some places Bahnsen softened words for which I actually wish he would have kept the edge. For example, in the same Article 7, he writes that "Argument for argument's sake when one is dealing in the vital matters of salvation and damnation would be *unseemly*" (my emphasis). In the original draft Bahnsen had written "sadistic" rather than "unseemly." The stronger word, I think, really presses the truth for those who may forget (for whatever reason) the mission of apologetics. To allow an apologetical encounter to follow rabbit trails (or "foolish questions," as Paul calls such diversions—Titus 3:9), or not to prosecute the unbeliever's case with the most effective apologetic tools available ignores that eternal torment awaits the unrepentant unbeliever. To present anything less than the fullest truth of God in the name of apologetics is thoroughly sadistic.

In regard to the quality of argument and character contained in this volume, we must remember—and it comes to my amazement—that Bahnsen completed the bulk of this text at the young age

of twenty-five years old. Having completed his Master of Divinity and Master of Theology degrees simultaneously (unheard of then and now!) at Westminster Theological Seminary, he immediately began teaching alongside veteran professors at RTS in Jackson. To advance such a work as this one as far as he did while handling other duties, while engaging in other major theological debates, and yet maintaining something of a pastoral concern for his own words exhibits the highest of character and composure. One may (although with some reservation) compare the magnitude of this effort so early in life to Calvin's publication of the first edition of his *Institutes* (1536) at the age of twenty-six. We can only hope that readers will still profit from reading Bahnsen five hundred years later, as we do Calvin today.

Those further interested in Bahnsen's personal life, character, work, and influence will find substantial and encouraging material in *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen*.⁷ This important work offers a biography written by Greg's son David, as well as essays contributed by Michael Butler, Robert Booth, Jeffrey Ventrella, and many others, all exhibiting the Van Til-Bahnsen perspective.

About the Format and Editing

Besides headings and subheadings, the reader will notice two typefaces appearing within the main text of this book. With the different fonts we intend to delineate between Bahnsen's contributions (the main purpose of the publication) and any editorial notations. Bahnsen's main text appears in a traditional typeface and rightfully constitutes the vast majority of the text. With the exception of this Preface, my contributions appear only in footnotes, but maintain the font-face you see here.

I have attempted to keep any editorial comments to a minimum. Where I have included such I have done so for the purpose of clarification, elucidation, or adding what I consider to be helpful context. Otherwise, I have limited the editor's role in this project mainly to the most faithful construction and presentation of the

7. Steve M. Schlissel, ed. (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002).

text possible, including Bahnsen's last available edits so that the final product appears as closely as he would have intended. Possibly excepting the decision to save the incomplete Part 3 for later publication, I believe we have realized this goal.

PART ONE

**PRESUPPOSITIONAL
APOLOGETICS POSITIVELY STATED**

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: GOD IN THE DOCK?

John Calvin wrote, “Contentious disputes arise from the fact that many think less honorably than they ought of the greatness of divine wisdom, and are carried away by profane audacity.” These words were written in his commentary on 1 Peter 3:15, a verse long taken as the charter of Christian apologetics. It commissions and defines how a Christian should defend the faith: “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to set forth a defense to everyone who asks you for a reasoned account concerning the hope in you, yet with gentleness and respect.” A truly Christian defense of the faith must never fail to exalt Christ as Lord over all, including argumentation and reasoning. An apologetic that builds on any other rock than Christ does not honor the greatness of divine wisdom; it is foolishly and audaciously erected on the ruinous sands of human authority.

The task of apologetics must be exercised upon the infallible and presupposed authority of the Word of Christ in Scripture. Apologetics does not first do obeisance to human philosophy and science and then proceed to encompass God in its sphere of reverence. The Christian cannot, indeed must not, take an unattached or neutral stance with respect to his faith in order to win the unbeliever over to Christ’s authority. A Christian apologetic grows out of, and is shaped according to, a total dedication to the wisdom of the *Logos* as expressed in His inscripturated Word—not self-

sufficient human “wisdom.” “Let us hold fast the profession of our hope without wavering, for the one who promised is faithful” (Heb. 10:23). Since God is faithful to us, our apologetic must not be faithless to Him; in setting forth our defense we must not set aside or waver with respect to the profession of our faith. Christian apologetics must begin and end with Him who is the alpha and the omega, the one who only and always reigns as Lord.

The purpose of this treatise is to exhibit presuppositional apologetics as the only faithful and sound method of contending for the Christian hope and biblical message. Resting upon the authority of the living God rather than that of independent human reasoning, the apologist must presuppose the truth of Scripture and lay siege to all apostate presuppositions. This must be his method because the Word of God in the Bible has a unique epistemological status for the Christian: it requires no corroboration and carries its own evidence inherently or self-attestingly. As God makes a total demand upon the lives of His covenant people they recognize that the words of Scripture are logically primitive,¹ the most ultimate authority. So if our apologetic is to be a *Christian* apologetic it must be *presuppositional* in character and method.

AUTONOMY VS. REVELATIONAL AUTHORITY

Thinking to maintain neutrality with respect to Scripture, any natural theology that reasons autonomously *from* logical and/or empirical grounds *to* God results in an exclusion of *revelational necessity and authority* endorsing some other imperious philosophy. Knowledge of God must be rooted in His own *self*-disclosure. Because the clear revelation of God in nature’s and man’s constitution is suppressed in unrighteousness, it is impossible for theology or apologetics to base their efforts in a rebellious understanding of the world or history, independently working up to a verification of God’s written revelation. Faith must necessarily start with the clear, authoritative, self-attesting, special

1. By “primitive” Bahnsen does not intend to conjure up images of cave-dwellers or log cabins. He uses the term to mean “primary” as in “starting point.” He makes the same point about Scripture elsewhere using similar phrases: “place to stand,” “reference point,” and “ultimate standard.” See Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburgh, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1998), 127n.113, 230, 508–509, as well as 18–20 below.

revelation of God in Scripture coordinated with the Holy Spirit's inner testimony to the regenerated heart.

Historically, when David Hume and Immanuel Kant exposed the invalidity of the theistic proofs, apologists generally balked at returning to revelation as the basis for their certainty of God's existence. They elected, rather, to maintain status in the blinded eyes of the "worldly wise" by attempting to prove Christianity's credibility by means of arguments that hopefully *pointed* toward the *probability* of God's existence and Scripture's truth. They settled for a mere *presumption* (plus pragmatic assurance) in favor of a few salvaged items (i.e., "fundamentals") from the Christian system. Refusing to *presuppose* the sovereign God revealed in the Bible as the source of all material and logical possibility, and hence failing effectively to challenge or internally criticize the very feasibility of knowledge, logic, factuality, interpretation, or predication as based on the boasted autonomy of "free-thinkers," apologists found their defenses razed by those who (likewise) postulated that bare possibility was a principle more ultimate than God. Deterministic science disqualified *miracles*, positivistic sociology relativized *morality*, historical criticism faulted the Bible, and Kant's transcendental dialecticism invalidated cognitive *revelation*. Idealism made God finite, pragmatism made Him irrelevant, and logical analysis made Him *meaningless*. Process thinking limited *God* by pulling Him down from the throne of His sovereignty and pulling everything up into Him for the panentheistic drive to omega point, while phenomenology made the *universe* into a machine for the fabricating of gods, and existentialism made *man* himself the being who strives to become God. By appealing to probability, apologists saw Christianity relegated to the museum of mere religious hypotheses (i.e., "possibilities"), rather than embraced as the actual truth of God.

The present urgency for Christians, then, is to submit to and adopt a revelational epistemology and scriptural apologetic that are honoring to God and powerful tools against unbelief. The Christian apologist must not trade away the certainty of knowing God for a probability or subjective moral conviction; he must unashamedly presuppose the truth of the Word of Christ in Scripture as congruous with the inescapable self-revelation of God in nature and man's constitution. Then he will be equipped with spiritual weapons that are mighty to the pulling down of every reasoning that exalts itself against God. God's self-attesting revelation must be taken as the firm foundation of all knowledge, the final

test for truth, and the standard for living. We are under obligation to submit every facet of our lives to Scripture—whether it be morals, vocation, emotions, deliberations, reasoning, or even the use of logic.

No attempt should be made to soften our principal and basic antithesis with the unregenerate; by conceding ground to the assumptions of autonomy, the apologist loses his forceful challenge and assured life-source. A non-Christian principle can never genuinely be fruitful within the framework of Christian thought and apologetic. Hence we must avoid embracing Platonism (as did the early apologists), Aristotelianism (as did the scholastics), Rationalism and Empiricism (as did the men of the enlightenment), or Kantianism and existentialism (as did modern thinkers).

By catering to autonomous assumptions the Christian will see his message absorbed into its diametric opposite as a result of his alien methodology. But by presupposing the sovereign Creator and His Word as the requisite transcendental of any intellectual endeavor, the apologist can expose the fatal defects of all autonomous reasoning, calling unregenerate men back (for the sake of their eternal salvation) to covenantal obedience in terms of God's Word, and praying for the operation of the Holy Spirit to that end. The only proper starting point for an adequate theology and apologetic is God's special revelation; only upon this necessary, sufficient, authoritative, and clear foundation can any fact receive a proper interpretation—God's interpretation. When man will submit to the powerful and meaningful Word of Christ in Scripture his eyes will be opened to recognize God's revelation in every phenomenon of nature, principle of reason, and detail of history—a revelation that constantly exerts its pressure on him even while he struggles to hold it back.

Being confident of these things, a truly Reformed apologetic must begin from the presupposition that the living and true, triune God speaks to him with absolute authority in infallible Scripture. His reasoning then finds its only legitimate function as a *servant* or tool of God's Word, rather than its judge. Following God's Word, the Christian receptively reconstructs the created facts of the universe about him with a view toward both fulfilling the cultural mandate and being conformed to the image of his Savior by the power of Christ's Spirit; hereby he glorifies God and enjoys Him forever. Thus, the apologetic task will consist, *not of externally verifying* the Christian presupposition but, of *applying* it by (1) bringing God's truth and commands to bear upon the lives of unbe-

lievers, appealing to the image of God in them (distinguishing between present remnants of man's original nature and the ever-present nature of fallen man), pointing out that every fact of the world bears witness to God, and (2) doing an internal critique of the non-Christian's system, calling down its idols, and pointing out the absolute necessity of Christian presuppositions if logic, factuality, history, science, and morality are to have any meaning, validity, and application at all. The Christian apologetic will not concede intellectual ground to Christianity's cultured despisers or allow them to exploit theoretical foundations to which they have no legitimate claim without depending on the Christian faith. Thus, part of the Christian's reasoned defense of the faith will be an aggressive offense.

Not like the fool who built his house upon the sand, the Christian apologist must, in love for Christ, found his whole life, including apologetical reasoning, upon the solid rock of *Christ's Word*. In accordance with this the apologist seeks the *repentance* of the sinner and does not encourage his continued use of hostile, autonomous reason in judgment over God's Word. We seek a God-controlled man, not a man-controlled god.

WHO SHALL JUDGE

The circumstance in which we find ourselves defending the Christian faith is aptly described by C. S. Lewis:

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock.... The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the bench and God in the dock.²

It is this situation that must be rectified; the sinful attitude portrayed here needs to be redressed. Consequently the infallible Word of God must be presupposed by our apologetic without apologies. We defend a genuine system of authority that cannot be known except by divine revelation; this inscripturated Word from God stands in judgment over all

2. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. W. Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

and is itself to be judged by no one. The submission to this authoritative revelation is caused, not by impudent reasoning, but by the Holy Spirit. God's Word is perfectly rational; however, it is not the autonomous "rational man" who receives it, but the "humble man" who knows better than to subject the sovereign Lord's prerogatives to an independent test for verification at the overriding bar of human intellect. J. I. Packer is right to the point:

Nor, again, may we present the faith as a philosophy, to be accepted (if at all) on grounds of rational demonstration; we must always declare it as revealed truth, divinely mysterious and transcending reason's power to verify, to be received humbly on the authority of God. Faith involves the renunciation of intellectual self-sufficiency; we must always proclaim the gospel in a way that makes this clear.³

The natural man is in no position to pass judgment upon the reality and reliability of God's special revelation at the tribunal of reason; his powers of appraisal are incompetent, his standards distorted. Our apologetic must never encourage the contrary opinion. The fact that God has delivered redemptive special revelation should itself indicate to us that we cannot overture the unregenerate to use principles of logic and science rooted in natural revelation (which he suppresses in unrighteousness) to evaluate the Bible.

If special revelation assumes that in consequence of sin the normal activity of the natural principium is disturbed, this implies of itself that the natural principium has lost its competency to judge. He who considers it possessed of this competency declares thereby *eo ipso* that it is still normal, and thus removes all *sufficient reason* for a special revelation. You must either deny it the right of judgment, or, if you grant it this right, the object disappears upon which judgment shall be passed. The psychiatrist, who treats the maniac, cannot render his method of treatment dependent upon the judgment of his patient.

3. J. I. Packer, *'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 136.

Equally little can you attribute this right of judgment over the special principium to the natural principium....⁴

Our defense of the faith accomplishes nothing positive if throughout it we allow the unbeliever to keep God in the dock, thinking that he has every right and capability to stand in judgment over the one whom he has sinned against. August Lecerf rightly points out that our apologetic arguments

have no persuasive value except from the moment when, at once vanquished and enlightened by grace, the natural man consents, as is his objective duty, to relinquish the autonomy of his reason and submit to the discriminating principle of religious truth. This principle consists in the affirmation of the absolute independence and exclusive sovereignty of God in the noetic order, as in all the orders of reality. It is the *solī Deo gloria*.⁵

A Christian apologetic does not seek, therefore, autonomously to verify God's Word, having the believer serve as God's defense attorney who attempts to win an acquittal from the tribunal of the unbeliever. The Bible is not externally verified at all, for *it* has absolute authority inherent to itself; its *self*-attesting nature is of utmost apologetical significance.

The ground of faith emphatically is not our ability to demonstrate all the teaching of the Bible to be self-consistent and true. This is just saying that rational demonstration is not the ground of faith.... The nature of faith is acceptance on the basis of testimony, and the ground of faith is therefore testimony or evidence.... This means simply that the basis of faith in the Bible is the witness the Bible itself bears to the fact that it is God's Word.... This might seem to be arguing in a circle.... We should be little disturbed by this type of criticism. It contains an inherent fallacy. It is fully admitted that normally it would be absurd and

4. Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1898), 381.

5. August Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 213.

a miscarriage of justice for a judge to accept testimony of the accused rather than the verdict required by all the relevant evidence. But the two cases are not analogous. There is one sphere where self-testimony must be accepted as absolute and final. This is the sphere of our relation to God. God alone is adequate witness to himself.⁶

Hence our apologetic would not serve to put man in the dock and recognize God as the legitimate judge at the bench if it strove to work into faith from an independently acquired and neutral understanding of logic and facts. Our understanding does not precede and serve to arbitrate with respect to the faith to which God calls us. By contrast, faith precedes and undergirds any and all genuine understanding by the human intellect. Faith is not established upon the groundworkings of reason, but *vice versa*. Human understanding can never be made the verification of faith since without faith there is no proper understanding available to man whereby he might judge. As Augustine well said, “I believe in order to understand.”⁷ Christian apologetics must reckon with this truth by beginning with the self-attesting word of Scripture as an absolutely necessary presupposition, the assurance of which being produced by the Holy Spirit, who opens blinded eyes to see God speaking authoritatively in the Bible and who grants a heart of flesh enabled to bow before the Holy Sovereign.

BY WHAT STANDARD?

Because God’s inscripturated Word bears highest epistemic certainty, our defense of the Christian faith begins not with proofs and probabilities, but with the presupposition of the Bible’s truth. The conclusion of Calvin is most appropriate here:

Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture, and

6. John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” *The Infallible Word*, eds. Stonehouse and Woolley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 7ff.

7. This is a paraphrase. See, for example, St. Augustine, “Tractates on the Gospel of St. John,” XXIX.6 (John 7:14–18), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, 14 vol., ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 [1888]), 7:184.

that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated; hence, it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning. And the certainty it deserves with us, it attains by the testimony of the Spirit. For even if it wins reverence for itself by its own majesty, it seriously affects us only when it is sealed upon our hearts through the Spirit. Therefore, illumined by his power, we believe neither by our own nor by anyone else's judgment that Scripture is from God; but above human judgment we affirm with utter certainty (just as if we were gazing upon the majesty of God himself) that it has flowed to us from the very mouth of God by the ministry of men. We seek no proofs, no marks of genuineness upon which our judgment may lean; but we subject our judgment and wit to it as a thing far beyond any guesswork!... Such, then, is a conviction that requires no reasons; such, a knowledge with which the best reason agrees—in which the mind truly reposes more securely and constantly than in any reasons; such, finally, a feeling that can be born only of heavenly revelation.⁸

The Christian religion is under constant attack by the unregenerate, being pitted against rival religions, logicistic onslaughts, scientific incursions, and the like. Moreover, to complicate the apologetical exigency, the defensive stances that have been advocated throughout the years are manifold and multiform. The central question, then, in the pursuance of the apologetical task is, *what standard should be utilized* for guidance, judgment, and argument? Is the acceptance of that standard based on an arbitrary volition or upon a reasoned case? How can one be sure his standard is right, and to what degree of certainty is he entitled? The Westminster Confession of Faith definitively answers these questions of apologetical criterion for those religious disputes in which the apologist finds himself; if we heed its word, God will no longer be sinfully assigned to the dock to plead for acceptance before the judgment of self-deified, autonomous men.

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion

8. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I. VII. 5, from *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vol. XX, ed. J. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), p. 80.

are to be determined, and all... doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture....

The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God....

Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.⁹

Here we see that the ultimate standard for the Christian must always be the self-attesting word of God. This standard is accepted because of what it truly claims to be (the word of God) and not on the basis of independent human buttresses. This self-attesting revelation of God is objectively true and authoritative, even though subjective persuasion about it comes only by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. By what *standard*, then, shall Christian apologetics proceed? By the standard of God's self-attesting word. Far too often apologists have failed to recognize the unavoidable and reciprocal relation between one's theological system and his apologetic method. The result has been methodological inconsistency: a different epistemology for expounding the faith than that used in defending the faith. However, we must not defend our *message*—that Christ's word is self-attesting and possessing the ultimate authority of the Lord—with a *method* that works counter to it—by claiming an ultimate epistemological standard outside of Christ's word of truth. The final criterion for the Christian in every department of his thinking (theology and philosophy, proclamation and defense) is the self-attesting word of God.

9. Chapter I, Sections X, IV, and V.

The Insufficiency of Traditional Methods

Since this self-attesting word *is* what it claims to be, and thus the divinely-given standard of truth and knowledge, we must not present Christian faith as an unreasonable, voluntaristic, fideistic decision of the heart. We definitely have reasons for submitting to Christ—reasons which can be used to appeal to, and argue with, the unbeliever. Judged by this objectively true standard, all facts and logic must support the truth of Christianity. Because this ultimate standard is correct, those who attempt to use contrary standards can only destroy the very possibility of intelligible experience of the facts, reasonable explanation of the world or history, and meaningful interpretation or communication.

Consequently, we must not be satisfied to present Christianity as the most reasonable position to hold among the competing options available to men. Rather, the Christian faith is the only reasonable outlook available to men. Fideism says Christianity is not a matter of reason. The traditional approach to apologetics is somewhat better; it does not throw over the reasoned defense of Christianity. However, by using a standard of knowledge and truth which is independent of God's self-attesting word, and by claiming only a high degree of probability for the Christian hypothesis (as judged autonomously in the light of facts and logic), it does not go far enough in defending the word of the self-attesting Christ. It does not at base present the intellectual challenge of the gospel, but makes fatal concessions to the unbeliever's desire for intellectual self-sufficiency.

The traditional method... is based on the assumption that man has some measure of autonomy, that the space-time world is in some measure "contingent" and that man must create for himself his own epistemology in an ultimate sense.

The traditional method was concessive on these basic points on which it should have demanded surrender! As such, it was always self-frustrating. The traditional method had explicitly built into it the right and ability of the natural man, apart from the work of the Spirit of God, to be the judge of the claim of the authoritative Word of

God. It is man who, by means of his self-established intellectual tools, puts his “stamp of approval” on the Word of God and then, only after that grand act, does he listen to it. God’s Word must first pass man’s tests of good and evil, truth and falsity. But once you tell a non-Christian this, why should he be worried by anything else that you say. [sic] You have already told him he is quite all right just the way he is! Then Scripture is not correct when it talks of “darkened minds,” “wilful ignorance,” “dead men,” and “blind people”! With this method the correctness of the natural man’s problematics is endorsed. That is all he needs to reject the Christian faith.¹⁰

What the apologist must endeavor to do is to demonstrate that without Christian presuppositions there is no intelligible use of facts and logic—that human knowledge and interpretation fail instantly. Therefore, to be reasonable at all, men must submit to the ultimate standard of God’s self-attesting word; to refuse this is to insist upon intellectual foolishness and eternal damnation.

When the Christian apologist points out that his ultimate standard is God’s revealed word, the non-Christian will rightly observe that it is just the truth of this standard that is now in question. The believer has not been requisitely “open-minded.” To this we must reply that, on the other hand, the unbeliever has not been uncommitted and neutral from the outset either; he has used an espoused standard for weighing and interpreting the facts which precludes the truth of the Christian position. He has been begging the question. The unavoidable fact is—regardless of how intensely some apologists lament or decry it—that nobody is a disinterested observer, seeing and interpreting the facts without a set of assumptions and pre-established rules. All men have presuppositional commitments prior to their examination of various hypotheses. In the nature of the case, apologetics requires that we argue with the unbeliever in terms of each other’s most basic assumptions. We must challenge each other’s final standards. This means that we must contest the grounds on which our opponent stands, showing that only within the context of the Christian worldview could he know anything at all. We

10. Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 11.

must show his espoused standard to be self-vitiating, explaining that to see even this fact requires working in terms of the Christian's ultimate standard. Thus Christianity is the only reasonable position to hold—the only outlook which can have an apologetic. That is, we must argue that the non-Christian's epistemology and corresponding metaphysic not only prevent him from coming to faith in Christ, but they prevent him (if held consistently) from coming to any knowledge whatsoever.

Such an argument as this refuses to consign the Lord God Almighty to the dock, awaiting the rational verdict of the sinful creature who has arrogated to himself abilities and prerogatives in the intellectual realm to which he has no legitimate claim. Such an argument does not settle for the conclusion that Christianity is possibly, perhaps probably, true; it is an appeal to the *necessity* of Christianity's truth. It is the most stringent defense of Christianity as reasonable. It stands in diametric opposition to fideism. Moreover, it does not settle for the leniency of half-way measures of traditional apologetics (which fail to challenge unbelieving epistemology, urging its further use so as to conclude merely that Christianity is probably true).

The Necessity of a Presuppositional Approach

Since neutrality is unattainable for either the unbeliever or believer, and since they have conflicting ultimate standards for judging claims to knowledge, the task of apologetics will ultimately be carried on at the presuppositional level. Contrasting worldviews are being debated. Each worldview has its presuppositions about reality, knowledge, and ethics; these mutually influence and support each other. There are no facts or uses of reason which are available outside of the interpretive system of basic commitments or assumptions which appeals to them; the presuppositions used by Christian and non-Christian determine what they will accept as factual and reasonable, and their respective presuppositions about fact and logic will determine what they say about reality. Thus there can be no direct proof offered for the truth of either perspective; direct appeals to fact and reason are emptied of argumentative strength by the opponent's presuppositions (with which he understands and accepts facts and logic in a different light altogether). The argument between believer and unbeliever must then be indirect, admitting the impossibility of a neutral approach to reasoning and facts which are

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