

“A major undertaking in Christian apologetics, this volume makes a most timely and welcome contribution. By labeling the apologetic task ‘covenantal,’ Scott Oliphint highlights throughout that the presuppositions of ‘presuppositional apologetics’ are the clear and indubitable teachings of Scripture and have nothing to do with the postmodern understanding of presuppositions as little more than the personal commitments, inevitably relativizing, of the individual apologist. Comprehensive in its scope, this balanced mix of principles and practice provides valuable instruction to a broad range of readers. I commend it most highly.”

**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“In a day marked by shallow thinking, weak reasoning, and arguments lacking in both theological and biblical depth, Oliphint offers an arsenal of apologetic insight. His affirmation and exposition of a covenantal apologetic brings a vital biblical and theological dimension to the apologetic task. Believers seeking to give an answer for their hope will enthusiastically receive this book.”

**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“K. Scott Oliphint has done us a service in wonderfully translating the venerable Van Tillian apologetic approach into more accessible categories for the practice of apologetics in the contemporary world. Grounded in Scripture and Reformed theology, upholding the lordship of Christ in all of life, eschewing neutrality in our thinking, and tackling the hard cases of the problem of evil, naturalistic evolution, and Islam, Oliphint teaches us how to defend Christianity in a biblically faithful and persuasive manner. I highly recommend this work.”

**Stephen J. Wellum**, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Whatever your view and practice of defending your faith, *Covenantal Apologetics* will both motivate and equip you for the task in a way that is persuasive, winsome, clearly structured, thoroughly biblical, and most importantly, Christ-exalting. Dr. Oliphint roots us in the unequivocal authority of God’s existence and his self-revelation, and brings principles down to earth by providing potential conversations with a humanist, an atheist, an evolutionist, and a Muslim. If you want to grow in your confidence in Scripture, your evangelistic fruitfulness, and your love for the Savior, read this book.”

**Bob Kauffin**, Director of Worship, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“Engaging unbelief is the work of every believer in a post-Christian culture. In everyday conversations pluralism demands that we give equal value to all religious beliefs. To stabilize us in this culture, we turn to God’s revelation in Scripture. Drawing from his own experience and offering concrete dialogues, apologist Scott Oliphint models a Christian response to unbelief and has delivered the type of book we desperately need—biblically grounded, God-centered, jargon-pruned, and clearly written. *Covenantal Apologetics* is an essential tool to meet unbelief with the hope of the gospel.”

**Tony Reinke**, Content Strategist, Desiring God Ministries

“With seismic changes in our society’s perception of life—and especially of human rights—the need for Christians to give reasons for their faith is even greater today. Scott Oliphint comes to our aid by bringing what is often food that only giraffes can eat (the field technically called apologetics) right down to the grasp of Christ’s lambs. Here is a book that will enable you to argue intelligently from Scripture, in the midst of a plethora of false philosophies and religions, as to why the world needs Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”

**Conrad Mbewe**, Senior Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Zambia, Africa

“*Covenantal Apologetics* places the defense of the Christian faith where it belongs—in a rich texture of appropriate contexts: the self-revelation of the triune God in the Bible and his created universe, the covenantal relationship of all people (rebellious and redeemed) with their personal Creator, the evangelistic mission of the church, the persuasive power of character and humility, and the give-and-take of interpersonal relationships and conversations. Instead of offering formulaic arguments to win debating points, Oliphint urges Christians to bring a full-orbed theology as we winsomely and forthrightly engage proponents of unbelief and other beliefs. Especially helpful are the sample dialogues with spokespersons for humanism, atheism, and Islam.”

**Dennis E. Johnson**, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Few people have thought as deeply and carefully as Scott Oliphint about the relationship between confessional Reformed theology and Christian apologetics. There has been much talk in recent years about ‘covenantal apologetics,’ but it has consisted mainly of informal discussions scattered across the blogosphere. What has been sorely needed is a definitive book-length exposition by a well-regarded scholarly advocate. No one is better qualified than Dr. Oliphint to take on that task, and he has not disappointed. This book clearly explains the theological foundations of covenantal apologetics and illustrates its application in real-world conversations.”

**James Anderson**, Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“Oliphint’s refreshingly Christ-centered approach to persuasively engaging unbelievers with the truth of God equips readers not merely for an intellectual contest of demolishing arguments, but also for a spiritual battle against the suppression of truth in the human heart.”

**Nancy Guthrie**, author, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* series

“I am grateful to see Oliphint taking Reformed apologetics in a more accessible, less technical, and richly biblical-theological direction. His approach is uniquely centered on God’s revelation in Christ and emphasizes persuasion aimed at the heart over argumentation targeting the head alone. The book goes beyond merely discussing principles to presenting thorough case studies demonstrating how covenantal apologetics can be put into practice. As a professor and pastor, I will recommend this to many people and assign it in my apologetics courses.”

**Justin Holcomb**, Executive Director, The Resurgence

“Scripturally based, historically informed, theologically astute, and contemporarily relevant, *Covenantal Apologetics* equips one intellectually and spiritually.”

**Adriaan Neele**, Director, The Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University

“Dr. Oliphint elegantly displays the theological consistency of covenantal apologetics while demonstrating the practical usefulness of this method in addressing a variety of contemporary challenges to Christian faith. Perhaps most importantly, this book provides sturdy motivation for engaging nonbelievers, directing us to place our confidence not in our own apologetic prowess, but in the gospel’s power, Scripture’s authority, and the Holy Spirit’s activity.”

**Jeff Purswell**, Dean, Sovereign Grace Ministries Pastors College

“I appreciate the way Oliphint deals with the necessity of the lordship of Christ. He is Lord of all, which means that while truth is not relative, as God’s truth it has relational implications and applications. Oliphint’s emphasis regarding covenantal

apologetics standing on the truth of Christ's lordship is critical to the task, especially in our postmodern culture."

**Charles Dunahoo**, Former Coordinator, Presbyterian Church in America  
Christian Education and Publications

"As a teacher I have been crying out for an apologetics primer that would help to demystify a presuppositional method, demonstrate the exegetical and biblical-theological basis for this method, and give some idea as to what this might look like in the real world with real people. Oliphint's *Covenantal Apologetics* fills this need. It is not only principled and practical, but also pastoral."

**Daniel Strange**, Academic Vice Principal and Tutor in Apologetics,  
Oak Hill College, London

"*Covenantal Apologetics* is carefully written with close attention to detail. It is clear, compelling, and cogent. I recommend it to every careful student of this important subject."

**Douglas Wilson**, Senior Fellow of Theology, New St. Andrews College

"Every pastor and preacher is a persuader, and this book provides not only the theological rationale but also practical help in that task of persuasion. Those who are committed to a gospel-centered ministry will be both inspired and instructed by Scott Oliphint's insights. Ministries will be strengthened and made more effective by adopting this biblically based and God-honoring paradigm of covenantal apologetics."

**Stafford Carson**, Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Portadown,  
Northern Ireland

"Too often books on Christian apologetics get lost in a labyrinth of complications. Such is not the case with Scott Oliphint's book. It establishes the biblical basis for apologetics by showing how Scripture and the lordship of Christ are vital for the communication of Christian truth. With its accent on apologetics as covenantal, it is clear, practical, coherent, and persuasive—which is, after all, what one wants when looking for reasons for believing something. Oliphint's approach does not remain in a theoretical comfort zone, but tackles problems of unbelief that confront us every time we access the media. If you have never read a book on apologetics, this is it!"

**Paul Wells**, Dean, Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France

"This book will become known as helpful among students and campus ministries. Oliphint effectively persuades the reader to defend the faith by his clear explanation of the loving covenantal relationship between God and his people, the redemptive work of Jesus, and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit."

**Rod Mays**, National Coordinator, Reformed University Ministries

"In attempting to put to rest the term 'presuppositional,' Oliphint integrates the best insights from his philosophical expertise in the Westminster Seminary tradition with the best insights from the Westminster Assembly theological tradition. The result: a book for both mind and heart. As a pastor, I welcome books that offer a consistently Reformed approach to a defense of Christianity. This may be the best one yet."

**Mark Jones**, Senior Minister, Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church

"What sets this book apart is Oliphint's insistence that the person and work of Jesus Christ take center stage in every apologetic discussion. Following Van Til, he relentlessly rallies us around the banner of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. Although Oliphint's apologetic approach is theologically and philosophically sophisticated, he makes it understandable and practical for ordinary Christians."

**Nathan Sasser**, Assistant Director of Academic Affairs, Sovereign Grace  
Ministries Pastors College

“Dr. Oliphint has given us a very important presentation of Christian apologetics for our day. His discussions draw heavily from Scripture in ways that are accessible to a wide range of Christian readers. He stands in the stream of presuppositional apologetics, and he makes great strides toward dealing with contemporary challenges to the faith. Followers of Christ who want to reach the lost will find this book invaluable.”

**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

“*Covenantal Apologetics* succeeds in proving the biblical-covenantal terms for the framework of an unashamed Reformed apologetic. I heartily recommend it, especially to those seeking a thorough introduction to this vital discipline. Those in or aspiring to pastoral ministry will find help to prepare God’s people for works of service and to provide reasons to a dying generation for our hope in our Savior. Those tasked with teaching in seminaries will find both academic stimulus and exegetical broadening. All of us already persuaded by Van Til will do well to recast our ‘presuppositionalism’ into this readily defensible and covenant-biblical frame.”

**Jim Wright**, Principal, John Wycliffe Theological College, Johannesburg, South Africa

“Even those who do not embrace Reformed theology or presuppositional apologetics will realize that *Covenantal Apologetics* offers a consistent apologetic approach. It is internally coherent, but also in line with the scriptural message and with Van Til’s heritage. The latter has often been discussed in highly academic terms. This text presents covenantal apologetics in an accessible way to church members, pastors, and others who may not have formal theological training. The book offers precious examples of apologetic practice and is therefore useful to equip every Christian to tackle concrete situations where a defense of the faith is needed. The more academically inclined, however, will enjoy the fact that the principles behind the concrete examples remain clearly visible and solid.”

**Renato Coletto**, Professor, Philosophy of Science, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

“Here is an important contribution to the literature on Van Til’s application of Reformed theology to the discipline of apologetics. Judicious, well written, and refreshingly accessible, Oliphint’s analysis is a compelling ‘translation’ of an approach to defending the faith that insists, among other things, that because human beings are covenant creatures who live and move and have their being in the world created and providentially sustained by the covenant-keeping God, ‘The only way properly to see yourself, the world, or anything else, is through the spectacles of Scripture.’ Highly recommended.”

**Paul Kjos Helseth**, Professor of Christian Thought, Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minnesota

“In a pluralistic world, *Covenantal Apologetics* expertly equips pastors, teachers, parents, and students with a superior biblical and theological framework for defending the faith in the public square. For Christians who seek to have a credible voice at the ‘Areopagus’ of our day, this book will help them to dismantle unbelieving worldviews with razor-sharp precision while honoring God’s redemptive mission. Oliphint reminds readers that any form of Christian apologetics divorced from the Triune God’s covenant realities will send the church on a fool’s errand. *Covenantal Apologetics* is faithful to the Bible, the gospel, and redemptive history. This book should be read widely.”

**Anthony B. Bradley**, Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics, The King’s College, New York

# COVENANTAL APOLOGETICS

*Principles and Practice  
in Defense of Our Faith*

K. SCOTT OLIPHINT

*Foreword by William Edgar*

 **CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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# Foreword

WILLIAM EDGAR

## **Slumber and Awakening**

Apologetics, the defense and commendation of a Christian worldview, went into something of a hibernation, if not an eclipse, in the twentieth century. A number of factors contributed to this slumber. Following an age of relative confidence in the capacity of humankind to bring about the kingdom of God, the new century found so many reasons to put such confidence into question. It was a time of unforeseen upheavals and became the bloodiest of all centuries in human history. The tribulations of the First and Second World Wars, economic turmoil, revolutions, dictators, and global threats of hostilities meant doubts about the future even in the realm of theology. Artists such as Picasso or Mondrian depicted a world without any kind of trustworthy transcendent meaning. The strange, troubled Polish émigré to Britain Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) wrote powerfully about his discoveries, in various colonies, of the manifestation of human evil. With some exceptions, the twentieth century was a time of disillusionment and doubt.

Accordingly, theologians such as Karl Barth (1886–1968) simply dismissed apologetics as a weak-kneed concession to natural theology. Rightly critical of the nineteenth-century pretensions claiming to usher in God’s kingdom in human ways, Barth went on, though, to argue that apologetics substitutes “human religion” for revelation, robbing the gospel of its inherent power. As he put it in the early parts of his *Church Dogmatics*, if Christianity takes up the weapons of apologetics, “it has renounced its birthright. It has renounced the unique power which it has as the religion of revelation. This power dwells

only in weakness.”<sup>1</sup> Apologetics, for Barth, only robs Jesus Christ of his freedom to make himself known directly. So great was Barth’s influence that many seminaries or graduate schools simply eliminated their departments of apologetics.

Suspensions of apologetics could also be found outside the neoorthodox camp. No less an evangelical figure than Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), and a number of his successors, thought the discipline a waste of time. “I question whether the defenses of the gospel are not sheer impertinences,” he once said. He declared that if Jesus were not capable of fighting his own battles, then Christianity would be in a bad state indeed. Using the familiar illustration of the lion in a cage, he declared that the best strategy is not to defend the beast, but to let him out. The “prince of preachers” worried that apologetics would simply compromise the authority of the gospel preached.

Similarly, certain exegetes argued that the apostle Paul decided when he came to Corinth “to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) because he had tried apologetics on Mars Hill and failed to achieve any results (Acts 17:16–34). F. F. Bruce comments that some see Paul’s statement to the Corinthians as a “confessed decision . . . as though he realized that his tactics at Athens were unwise.” But Bruce comments that this was likely not the case, since Paul was no novice at Gentile evangelization. Rather, he was simply assessing two different contexts and responding appropriately.<sup>2</sup> William Ramsey goes so far as to say that Paul was “disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by his experience in Athens. He felt that he had gone at least as far as was right in the way of presenting his doctrine in a form suited to the current philosophy; and the result had been little more than naught.”<sup>3</sup>

Are these not various cases of throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater? Barth’s dialectical theology found little room for celebrating any kind of natural revelation; he feared it could lead to natural theology, wherein nature would be seen as *predisposed* to grace. In his estimation the opposite is the case: nature only resists grace.

<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (1956; repr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 333.

<sup>2</sup>F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 246.

<sup>3</sup>William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1892), 252.

Barth's extreme view finds no warrant in Scripture, which is very insistent on the authority, necessity, sufficiency, and clarity of God's revelation in the creation and in human consciousness, as well as in special revelation. Romans 1:18–23 makes it clear that unbelieving people not only know *about* God and his standards, but also know God himself. Even Barth's fellow neoorthodox colleague Emil Brunner accepted the reality of a consciousness of God in the natural man, although in my view he did not deal fully with the implications of Romans 1:18ff.<sup>4</sup> Barth's polemical booklet *Nein* replied to Brunner's timid suggestions.<sup>5</sup>

Spurgeon's case is different. Perhaps like Barth he had read only the rationalist apologists of the nineteenth century, to which he rightly reacted. Unlike Barth, however, Spurgeon's theology was not dialectical. Rather, his zeal was to protect the gospel from the overgrowth of philosophical reasoning and preach it in all its "naked simplicity." The problem with that, however, is that it appears to eliminate all media—from the humanity of its carriers, to the requirement for adapting the message to particular audiences and cultures. After all, 1 Peter 3:15 enjoins the believer to respond to interlocutors with *apologia*. Making ourselves "all things to all people" does not necessarily compromise the gospel (1 Cor. 9:22). There really is no naked, simple gospel. It must be spoken in human language and argued carefully. Ironically, there is plenty of argument and apologetics in Spurgeon's sermons. The same might be said of Barth's work as well.

As to the view that Paul was disappointed in Athens and decided apologetics could not accomplish the task, we can find no evidence for any of that in the New Testament. While his time on Mars Hill was only brief, the result was the same as it was when he could stay in a place longer: some mocked, some wanted to hear more, and some joined him and believed (Acts 17:32–34). Besides, telling the Corinthians he would know only Christ and him crucified is a typically Pauline way of making his point. He is hardly telling them that he won't reason anymore and that he'll settle instead for repeating Christ and the cross like a mantra. His arguments for moral purity, for sound

<sup>4</sup> Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 32.

<sup>5</sup> For a thoughtful discussion of this very public debate, see Trevor Hart, "A Capacity for Ambiguity: The Barth-Brunner Debate Revisited," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 289–305.

marriage, for eating food from the public market, for order in worship, and for the resurrection of the dead are among the most involved discourses found in the New Testament.

Some apologetics was being done in the twentieth century despite these wet blankets. Roman Catholics remained active in responding to the surrounding culture with a defense of the faith. One thinks of Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) in France, or the remarkable G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) in Great Britain. We can also think of the neo-Thomists, or the “restorationists,” who produced such fertile thinkers as Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and Étienne Gilson (1884–1978). And there were a number of lay apologists from Great Britain, the most influential being the Anglican C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), specialist in medieval and Renaissance literature, storyteller, and apologist for the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

### Neo-Calvinism

Then there was another kind of voice from within Protestantism, one that is represented in the present volume. Stemming from the awakening in the Netherlands (*Het Réveil*) and the so-called neo-Calvinist movement in Holland and then in North America, a special kind of apologetics was born. Unlike some of the awakenings, *Het Réveil* touched a good number of theologians, philosophers, and historians. One of the founding fathers of this inventive approach was Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876). Something of a Renaissance man, Groen was a statesman, historian, and chronicler, and, for a time, secretary to King William I of Holland. He grew to become one of the most articulate opponents of political liberalism. The basis for contemporary liberalism was what he considered to be the spirit of revolution, represented by politicians such as Johan Thorbecke. Much of this spirit was bolstered by the French Revolution, about which he wrote a penetrating analysis.<sup>7</sup> Following several conservative historians, Groen argued that while the revolutionary spirit in France no doubt stemmed from understandable frustrations, its underlying motive was a revolt

<sup>6</sup>Many other names could be added, including Hans Urs von Balthasar. For a comprehensive overview of the most important schools, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999).

<sup>7</sup>Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, *Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution*, ed. Harry van Dyke (Toronto: Wedge, 1989).

against God's authority. In this way trends and historical movements could be understood in terms of their profound religious roots.

Such an approach became an inspiration for Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), Groen's collaborator in the work of the Anti-Revolutionary political party (the ARP). Kuyper had grown up in rather "modernist" theological circles and studied in a fairly liberal seminary, the Leiden Divinity School. But his life changed during and just after his doctoral studies. Through a number of circumstances and readings he began to think that God is much more directly involved in human affairs than he had previously thought. Kuyper longed for a deeper piety than he had known. As the Reformed pastor in the small village of Beesd, he encountered a simple peasant girl, Pietronella Baltus, who dared tell him he was not a believer! Instead of scorning her, he listened and eventually gave his life fully to God.

Kuyper became a thoroughly Calvinist theologian. In addition, he was a statesman, a journalist, and the founder of the Free University of Amsterdam. Among his many accomplishments, one of the most important for our purposes is the groundwork he laid for the type of apologetics set forth in the book you are reading. Indeed, in some ways, Kuyper is the father of Reformed apologetics. He believed that the Christian world-and-life view could be compared and contrasted with other, unbelieving worldviews, and that this could be done in all the different disciplines, from science to politics to the arts and beyond. To get a good grasp on his approach, one ought to read his *Lectures on Calvinism*, presented at Princeton University in 1898.<sup>8</sup> The Christian university he founded was based on the same conviction that one could engage in every kind of study as a Christian believer.

There is considerable irony in attributing to Kuyper such a crucial role in the development of Reformed apologetics, since he regularly condemned apologetics as an obscure endeavor, unable to answer the issues of the day! A number of questions are involved here, which space forbids exploring. At least one reason he saw little benefit in the discipline of apologetics is that his approach to worldview meant opposing massive system to massive system, whereas much apologetics was concerned, it seemed to him, only with narrow polemics and details. There

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943). This is the best introduction to Kuyper's thought.

were also theological reasons. His sense of the antithesis between belief and unbelief was so great that it left no real room for communication across the barriers. While he strongly believed in common grace, he saw its purpose as, first, to restrain sin and, then, to allow Christians to engage in social and cultural activity, such as labor reforms and furthering the good purposes of science, the arts, and so on.<sup>9</sup> Common grace was not for Kuyper a basis that allowed bridge building and apologetic persuasion to take place. Here, though unlike Barth, he differed with the majority Reformed tradition. For example, John Calvin believed that Romans 1:18–23 means all human beings possess a *sense of deity* to which the Christian apologist may appeal. Nonetheless, what Reformed apologists have been able to take away from Kuyper, more than his objections to the discipline, is his insight into worldview and the way in which we must oppose the deep principle of belief to the deep principle of unbelief, rather than simply arguing from the details.<sup>10</sup>

### Presuppositionalism

Here enters Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). He was born in the Netherlands, but moved with his family to Highland, Indiana, when Cornelius was ten years of age. They were farming people. The Van Tils attended the Munster Christian Reformed Church. Cornelius was educated at Calvin College, then spent a year at Calvin Seminary, followed by Princeton Theological Seminary and finally Princeton University, where he obtained the PhD in 1927, having written his dissertation on “God and the Absolute,” which interacted with Idealist philosophy. After a year in the pastoral ministry he returned to teach at Princeton Seminary in 1928. The next year he left to teach at the newly formed Westminster Theological Seminary, where he labored for more than forty years as professor of apologetics.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup>For a thorough study of Kuyper on common grace, see S. U. Zuidema, “Common Grace and Christian Action in Kuyper,” accessed, [http://www.reformationalpublishingproject.com/rpp/docs/S\\_U\\_Zuidema\\_on\\_Kuyper.pdf](http://www.reformationalpublishingproject.com/rpp/docs/S_U_Zuidema_on_Kuyper.pdf).

<sup>10</sup>For more on Kuyper’s relation to Reformed apologetics, see the introduction to Abraham Kuyper in *Christian Apologetics Past and Present: A Primary Resource Reader*, vol. 2, *From 1500*, ed. William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 331–35. Kuyper’s sphere of influence was considerable. He is behind the Amsterdam philosophy represented by Herman Dooyeweerd, H. G. Stoker, and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven.

<sup>11</sup>A first-rate biography of Van Til is John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008). This study covers many aspects of Van Til’s thought, but it also describes him as a churchman through and through.

Building on the great Reformed theologians past and present, including John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Benjamin B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, and C. W. Hodge, Van Til began to construct a truly biblical apologetic for the twentieth century. “Apologetics,” as he puts it in several places, “is the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life.”<sup>12</sup> This statement is significant at several levels. Van Til’s project was to take the Christian worldview (“philosophy of life”) and defend it over against unbelief. Notice he describes the “non-Christian philosophy” as coming in various guises. At bottom, though, unbelief is based on the dialectic of rationalism and irrationality at the same time. The term “vindication” should not throw us. It means justification rather than merely exoneration. Such justification takes the form of arguments for the truth of the Christian position that are different from the typical approaches in more traditional apologetics. Van Til said at least two things about the right kind of argument. First, there is no neutrality. You cannot “prove” the gospel simply by appealing to evidence or to some sort of logical demonstration, however sophisticated. Unless you embed evidence and logic in a framework that has authority, you have, in effect, sold the farm. You have not really challenged unbelief. The second thing, however, is that we may indeed build bridges to the unbeliever. Because unbelievers know God and have the sense of deity in them, we can appeal to that consciousness. We do that not by building on their philosophy, since despite having a knowledge of God they suppress the truth (they process it wrongly), as Paul explains in Romans 1:18; instead, we may and must appeal to their conscious knowledge of God and his requirements.

Accordingly, the apologetic procedure set forth by Van Til is to get over onto the ground of the unbeliever for argument’s sake, and then to show how such a position simply cannot square with its own claims. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), for example, affirmed that to be truly authentic, one’s views could not begin with any preset rules. The trouble is, then, how do we know Sartre is truly authentic, free of rules? The requirement to be without rules is a rule! Indeed, Sar-

<sup>12</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 17. A number of Van Til’s books were originally class syllabi handed to the students for discussion.

tre took moral and political positions, which were most often leftist. When the “iron mask is off,” Van Til says, we can then invite an unbeliever to see how in the Christian worldview you may find meaning and grace to think and to live.

Though Van Til did not use the term much, his approach has become known as *presuppositionalism*. The reason is that unless one presupposes the ontological Trinity (as he often referred to God), then it is impossible to make intelligible predications. Pierre Courthial, the dean of the Reformed Seminary at Aix-en-Provence, in my hearing called Van Til “the most original apologist of our times.” A principal reason for his originality is that he thought about philosophy and apologetics biblically and theologically. This earned him the criticism of some who believed the genres should not be mixed. Yet he insisted that unless one begins from God’s authority, revealed in the world and in the Scriptures, then we will always have an inadequate foundation for our views and our lives.

Van Til directly or indirectly inspired several generations of pastors, theologians, and laypersons. Some of them, like Francis Schaeffer (1912–1984), while not fully absorbing all of his teacher’s views, have had an extraordinary impact on those they instructed. Others adopted certain aspects of Van Til’s thought—say, the antithesis—but without detecting the radically gospel-driven aspect of his teaching. *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* is written by a man who has not only absorbed what Van Til stood for, but developed and applied it in ways Van Til was unable to do, simply because he was a pioneer more than a consolidator.

### **Covenantal Apologetics**

With the present volume, as with his other writings, K. Scott Oliphint has made a remarkable contribution to apologetics in the Reformed tradition. To begin with, much more than Van Til, who was usually satisfied merely to assume it, Oliphint does a good deal of biblical and theological explication for the reader. There are substantial sections here on the Trinity and the incarnation, as well as on biblical passages such as Acts 17 and many others, with which he substantiates his points. Oliphint, himself a rather original apologist, courageously

puts into question the usefulness of the expression *presuppositional apologetics* and suggests instead that because the project of Van Til and his school was to defend the faith within the larger structure of the relation of the Creator to the creature, a more apt name for this task would be *covenantal apologetics*. Taking his beginning point from the way God condescends to his creatures, Oliphint argues that apologetics should be conducted by reaffirming the way God remains God and yet truly (covenantally) relates to the real world that he has made. And then he shows how our response should be “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Oliphint highlights a feature of the *locus classicus* for apologetics, 1 Peter 3:15, not always noticed: its call first to lift up Christ in our hearts.

Oliphint spends considerable time on issues often ignored by typical books on apologetics. For example, he writes extensively of the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our apologetics. This may sound like a no-brainer, except that most books I know, if they mention the Holy Spirit, ask us to choose between pure argument and somehow letting the Spirit do all the work for us. Oliphint explains the numerous roles of the Holy Spirit in apologetics.

Oliphint conducts various specific arguments with considerable depth. Rather than the usual sound-byte responses to skeptics and relativists, he takes on individual philosophers in sometimes imaginative ways. For example, he interacts with skeptics like Richard Dawkins, who got himself into trouble by telling a young woman who had been propositioned in an elevator that her plight was far less serious than that of women living in countries where the law allows female mutilation. Dawkins sensed that there was a difference, but the outraged woman did not, nor could she get him to show why there was. In fact, Dawkins’s skeptical philosophy cannot produce a reason.

Oliphint addresses a number of problem areas that any apologist must address, and he does it by using the foundational theological principles that ought always to be at work in our arguments. This does not mean he simply quotes scriptural prooftexts so as to gag the interlocutor. Oliphint’s primary training outside of theology is in philosophy. Thus, he addresses the problem of evil as it is often discussed

<sup>13</sup>From the hymn by Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” 1747.

by philosophers. He thoughtfully interacts with Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil*. He looks into the relation of science to the Bible. He has important thoughts on Islam. Yet, instead of trying to cover every possible issue, he explains that a covenantal apologetic is not an encyclopedia of answers but a wise approach to the art of persuasion.

The word *practice* is part of the subtitle. In view of that, Oliphint has made every attempt to show how all of this works. That is, again, something less present in Van Til's corpus, but a badly needed extension. We are given here ten principles that should guide our practice in various conversations. He discusses the use of legitimate *ad hominem* arguments. Indeed, Oliphint gives us a number of sample dialogs between believers and unbelievers.

Not everything in this book is easy. Certain parts of it will require concentration. Yet, no one could miss the general flow. Altogether, this book is timely and full of encouragement. It accomplishes what it commends: persuasion. If my hunch is right, this book represents the next step and an assured future for the movement that began so long ago in Holland.

# Acknowledgments

This book is the product of decades of thought and teaching on the apologetic approach of Cornelius Van Til. Over time and through many readings and rereadings of his works, I continue to gain an ever-increasing awe and appreciation of his deeply insightful and faithful application of the Reformed theology that he saw as the lifeblood for a defense of the Christian faith.

I must first acknowledge Van Til's patience with me. As a young buck from Texas, out of the blue I once wrote him a letter to ask him questions about what I had been reading in his *Defense of the Faith*. Not only did he respond immediately, answering my questions graciously and humbly, but he even ended his letters with the remarkable phrase "Please write again," which I did, often. There is no substitute for the kind of humble and encouraging interaction that I received from him in those nascent days of apologetic discovery.

I must also thank my wife, Peggy. Even though she had deep suspicions about me as I began to think about these things when we were first married, she not only encouraged me to press on, but has become my most ardent helpmeet and supporter. She was the first one to read and critique each chapter in this book, and her comments helped make the end product much better than it would have been otherwise.

There have been, of course, colleagues, friends, and students along the way who have urged me to write a book like this and encouraged me. In that vein, I must mention my Westminster partner in apologetics, Bill Edgar. It is an honor to have Bill pen the foreword to this book. Bill has been a faithful friend and colleague, and has done nothing but encourage me in all my endeavors. It is no overstatement to say that I would not be fulfilling my calling in apologetics, humanly speaking, were it not for Bill's efforts in my behalf. I want also to thank my men-

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I am thankful also to the Board of Trustees of Westminster Theological Seminary for granting me a study leave in which I could focus on this project and bring it to completion.

This book is affectionately dedicated to my longtime good friends John and Elise Maynard. John has always wanted a book like this, and he has, as only he can, *continually* urged me to get to writing. His disappointment will likely be that I did not choose him as a coauthor. My only excuse is that it would have ended our long and fruitful friendship.

Thanks, finally, to Allan Fisher and Crossway. I began my publishing career with Allan when he was with Baker Book House. From then to the present, he has been a faithful encouragement to me. This book would not have come to fruition without his efforts.

# Introduction

All Divine Religion (say the Atheists) is nothing else than a human invention, artificially excogitated to keep man in awe; and the Scriptures are but the device of man's brain, to give assistance to Magistrates in Civil Government. This objection strikes at the root and heart of all Religion & opposeth two main principles at once: (1) that there is a God; (2) that the Scripture is the word of God.<sup>1</sup>

A few years ago I was involved in a conference overseas. The theme was the relationship of faith and reason. Most of the presenters were academicians and professors who came from an Eastern background. They were intensely curious about the various ways that the Western tradition thought about the relationship of faith and reason.

The paper I presented included a critique of Immanuel Kant's view of faith and knowledge, but it also included an argument for a theory of knowledge that had God's revelation as its ultimate ground. In the course of that presentation and discussion, I also wanted to make it clear to the other presenters that what I was urging was not simply a change of mind, although that was necessary. What I was urging was a total transformation that could be had only by way of faith in Christ. So I moved from a critique of Immanuel Kant to the *true* Immanuel, the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

During the discussion immediately after my presentation, one of the other presenters was particularly agitated. It seemed obvious to him that all I was saying with respect to the relationship of faith to reason was that such a relationship could not be truly understood unless

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Leigh, *Treatise on Divinity* (1646), 2.1, quoted in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 192.

<sup>2</sup>The full text of this presentation can be found in K. Scott Oliphint, "Using Reason by Faith," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73, no. 1 (2011): 97–112.

one accepted the Bible as true. He went on to ask me just why he or anyone else should accept the Bible as an authority. He was perplexed that I seemed to be arguing in a circle.

I admitted to him that I certainly was arguing in (some kind of) a circle. I was arguing that unless one accepts the Bible for what it says and what it is, there would be no real solution to the faith-and-reason problem. Then I made clear to the other presenters that they were all asking that their own views, based on their own reasoning and sources, be accepted as true. In every case, I said, every other presenter appealed to his own final authority. “So,” I asked, “on what basis should I accept your circle over mine?”

At that point there was an awkwardly long silence, after which one of the presenters said, “Maybe we should look again at the way Buddhism views these issues.” In other words, the only response to my query was to deflect it and to suggest perhaps that a more mystical approach would be a better way to think about these things.

That evening some of us at the conference took a riverboat tour after dinner. Two of the attendees at the conference were eager to discuss my presentation. They were adherents of Kant’s view, and they wanted to hear more about why I thought his view was so deficient. That more-than-three-hour conversation provided a wonderful opportunity to further discuss the reality and necessity of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and all that it entails, if one is interested in thinking properly about philosophy, or about anything else. The entire day, and into the evening, was one long apologetic discussion. I was attempting to defend the truth and faith of Christianity.

A number of presenters at this conference argued for some kind of generic theism. Their arguments were less than controversial. All they were saying, in effect, was that there might be a proper way to think about the possibility that a god could exist. Responses to these arguments mirrored the manner in which they were given—cool, pensive, and abstract. There was nothing in those kinds of arguments that required anything more than a response of, “Hmmm, perhaps,” in contrast to an all-day discussion.

The approach I took at that conference is the approach that will be developed in these pages. The beauty of this approach—and what

sets it off from any other apologetic method—is that it is naturally and centrally focused on the reality of God’s revelation in Christ, including, of course, the good news of the gospel.

What was so distinctive about the argument I gave at that conference was that it called for a radical commitment, a commitment that included a change of mind and heart, a commitment every bit as religious as the context in which these presenters had been reared.

That kind of argument could never settle for a response of, “Perhaps,” but was more conducive either to passionate objections or utter surrender. No abstract response would do in this case. The only way to think properly about faith and reason, I was arguing, is to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). No other way can provide what my fellow presenters were hoping for.

That conference was an academic one, so it needed an academic presentation. But the approach that I was employing at the conference fits just as comfortably in a more normal setting. What I hope to accomplish in this book is to set out (what has been called) a presuppositional approach to apologetics. As will become clear, however, I hope to do that in a way that is relatively free of technical vocabulary. You will rarely see the word *presupposition*. Not only so, but I will suggest another label for this approach; I will try to make the case for retiring the label *presuppositional* and adopting the label *covenantal*. The reasons for this will be laid out in chapter 1.

This book seeks to do a number of things. It is an attempt to move past a somewhat common *description* of apologetics and apply a new label. In applying a new label, it will argue why that label, and the content included in it, is more apt for the method advocated here.

We are also attempting to move discussions about a “presuppositional” approach to apologetics past simply laying out the *principles* that must be included in it. Those principles are important. As a matter of fact, they are central and crucial to the approach itself. But in my experience, many students of apologetics are growing weary of an almost interminable discussion of principles only. This is understandable. An apologetic that can do little more than continually talk about itself is not worth the effort exerted or ink spilled over it. An apologetic that leaves us in the dark as to exactly *how* it might be practiced will not

encourage the saints and will be of little use to the cause of Christ in the face of opposition.

So this book is not meant to be, technically speaking, another “introduction.” My publisher tells me that the word *Introduction* in a book title is so broad these days that it says very little about the contents of a book. Rather, this book is meant to be a basic translation. To translate means, literally, to “carry across.” There are two aspects of translation that I hope to accomplish in this book. First, translations usually refer to a “carrying across” from one language to another, for example, from Greek to English, in the case of the New Testament. What this book will do is translate the language, concepts, and ideas set forth in Van Til’s Reformed apologetic into language, terms, and concepts that are more accessible. Second, translations have to do with “carrying across” the meanings of words, phrases, and so forth. I hope to translate much of what is *meant* in Van Til’s own writings from their often philosophical and technical contexts to a more basic biblical and theological context. Part of that translation of meaning will include dialogs designed to show what it means, for example, when a defense of Christianity focuses on an opponent’s presuppositions.

As with any translation, there will, nevertheless, be some differences from the original. The differences will not be substantial. That is, they will not (as far as I know) change or negate any of Van Til’s central concerns. The differences, rather, will be of language and of style. While, for the most part, avoiding technical terminology, I will explain methodology by using some of the basic categories given to us in Scripture and in the Reformed theology that flows from Scripture. In that way, I hope that the discussion and development in this book will take a Reformed apologetic and move it forward.

Because my approach has its roots in biblical and theological truth, I will begin, in chapter 1, with some of the basic biblical content that informs that approach. Chapter 2 will then explain how that content applies specifically to the activity and discipline of apologetics. Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the methodological impetus behind a covenantal approach. I will argue that, given its theological roots, covenantal apologetics is better seen as the art of persuasion than as the science of demonstration.

Chapter 5 will attempt to show how (what is sometimes called) the

“Achilles’ heel” of Christianity—the problem of evil—can be adequately and biblically addressed in a way that moves, naturally and inexorably, to the good news of the gospel. Chapters 6 and 7 are, in the main, expositions, with example dialogs, of what it means for us to do apologetics in a way that requires that we “walk in wisdom toward outsiders.” The “outsiders” in chapter 6 will be those who hold to naturalistic evolution. In chapter 7, the “outsider” will be a convert to Islam.

The “movement” of the book will progress from the simple to the more complex. Each chapter is designed, in its own way, to build on the ones before it. So it just may be that the latter chapters will introduce ideas and concepts not yet familiar to some.

In the discipline of apologetics, however, there is a constant need for thoughtful, meditative practice. Such practice itself may be new to many. However, I am confident that the more complex material will become more and more obvious and familiar as readers give it more and more thought and meditation. In most everything that I say in the dialogs, all that is needed is a thoughtful commitment to the truths given to us in Scripture, and then the practice of probing the assumptions and foundations of any opposing position will come more readily.

In all of these chapters, there is a dual goal. I am attempting to explain the focus of our approach and then, through sample dialogs, show the approach “in action.” My hope is that this combination of “principles and practice” will move readers significantly forward in their interest in and practice of a defense of Christianity.

This, then, is the bottom-line truth that must be central in everything we discuss: Christianity is true, so anything opposing it is false. This means that whatever opposition to Christianity we face, it is by definition an opposition that is false. Even if we have no idea what the central tenets or teachings are in such opposition, we know at the outset that it cannot sustain itself in God’s world. The rest of this book is an attempt to explain the implications of that central truth.

One more note must be mentioned. As stated above, the approach that will be set out in this book is one that reached its halcyon days during the career of Cornelius Van Til. I have read virtually all of the significant criticisms of Van Til’s approach and am well aware of the problems that some see. However, none of those criticisms is convincing

enough to provoke a change in Van Til's basic approach. Whatever the critiques, Van Til's application of Reformed theology to the discipline of apologetics is obvious in everything he wrote; any advance on his discussion must reckon, first, with the theological roots of his approach.<sup>3</sup>

I am convinced that much more *biblical and theological* discussion is needed with respect to this approach. So much of the material related to this method is mired in deep and complex philosophical concepts and verbiage that it has remained, by and large, inaccessible to any who are not interested or schooled in such things. The change of terms and labels in this book is, therefore, not meant to be mere window dressing. It is meant to begin to alter discussions of how we understand and do apologetics. I remain convinced that if one embraces the theology that came out of the Reformation era, then this approach to apologetics is the only consistent option available. Discussions about that, then, ought to begin with the possibility of *theological* disagreements, and not with mere differences in *philosophy* or in philosophical jargon.

Though this book is a translation, it is not meant to eclipse its original source. Any who are interested in moving on—theologically and apologetically—after reading this book, should begin to collect the volumes listed at the end of chapter 1, for a start, and to work through those in light of the material presented here.

I am confident that no other method so naturally and clearly sets forth a defense of the *Christian* faith as this one does. The application of this approach is the best apologetic means to bring glory to God; it encourages others to know and understand that glory, as they see it in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).



Sure I must fight if I would reign;  
Increase my courage, Lord.  
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,  
Supported by Thy Word.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>For an excellent picture of Van Til's career, including the central focus of his theology on his work in apologetics, see John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

<sup>4</sup>Isaac Watts, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross," 1724.