

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Presuppositional Apologetics

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In apologetics, as in every aspect of the Christian life, the most important thing is to glorify God. Therefore, it is important for us to look in God's Word, the Bible,¹ to see if our Lord gives us any directives relevant to the apologetic task. It might seem strange to look in Scripture for teachings about knowledge, reasoning, proof, evidence, logic, and so on, but God often surprises us by getting involved in areas of life we would prefer to keep to ourselves. Indeed, every part of life is his domain, and thus he rules all of life, directly or indirectly, by his Word (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17; 2 Tim. 3:16–17).

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BIBLICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Scripture actually has a great deal to say about epistemology, or theory of knowledge.² It teaches that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10; 15:33) and of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). "Fear" here is that reverent awe that yields obedience. It is based on the conviction that God is Lord, and we are his creatures and servants. He has the right to rule every aspect of our lives. When he speaks, we are to hear with the profoundest respect. What he says is more important than any other words we may hear. Indeed, his words judge all the affairs of human beings (John 12:48). The truth of his words, then, must be our most fundamental conviction, our most basic commitment. We may also describe that commitment as our most ultimate *presupposition*, for we bring that commitment into all our thought, seeking to bring all our ideas in conformity to it. That presupposition is therefore our ultimate criterion of truth. We measure and evaluate all other sources of knowledge by it. We bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

¹ Presuppositional apologists unanimously hold strong views of Scripture, affirming that the biblical canon is God's Word, infallible and inerrant in the original manuscripts. I realize that even in evangelical circles there are many who question or limit the inerrancy of Scripture in some way. Obviously, I cannot enter into this issue here. For defense of a strong inerrantist position, I recommend Donald Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); idem, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1976), vols. 1–4; Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948); and Edward J. Young, *The Word Is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957).

² For a much more detailed account of biblical epistemology as I understand it, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987).

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To say this is to say that for Christians faith governs reasoning just as it governs all other human activities. Reasoning is not in some realm that is neutral between faith and unbelief. There is no such realm, since God's standards apply to all of life. We may not lay our faith aside when we study God's world. Unfortunately, many enter institutions of higher education thinking they may honor God on Sunday, while accepting all the standards of secular scholarship in their daily studies. That is not bringing every thought captive to Christ. The Christian must have a critical perspective on scholarship, testing every hypothesis by Scripture.³

But if faith governs reasoning, where does faith come from? Some might think it is essentially irrational, since in one sense it precedes reason. But that conclusion would not be warranted. The question, "Where does faith come from?" may be taken in two senses. (1) It may be asking the *cause* of faith. In that sense, the answer is that God causes faith by his own free grace. This is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.⁴ (2) Or it may be asking the *rational basis* of faith. In that sense, the answer is that faith is based on reality, on truth. It is in accord with all the facts of God's universe and all the laws of thought that God has ordained. The Holy Spirit does not cause us to believe lies. He is the God of truth, and so he makes us believe what is true, what is in accord with all evidence and logic. The faith he gives us agrees with God's own perfect rationality.

There is a kind of circularity here, but the circularity is not vicious. It sounds circular to say that faith governs reasoning and also that it is based on rationality. It is therefore important to remember that the rationality that serves as the rational basis for faith is God's own rationality. The sequence is: God's rationality → human faith → human reasoning. The arrows may be read "is the rational basis for."⁵ That sequence is linear, not circular.

If faith is in accord with God's own thought, then it will also be in accord with human reasoning at its best, which images God's. God gave us our rational equipment, not to deceive us, but so that we might gain knowledge. Apart from sin, we may trust it to lead us into the truth; and the facts of God's creation bear clear witness of him even to the minds of sinners (Rom. 1:20). Thus, it is not wrong to use evidences and human logic to

³ See "In Defense of Something Close to Biblicism," appendix B in my *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997).

⁴ I don't apologize for the Calvinistic assumption here. Presuppositional apologists are Calvinists for the most part. And the Scriptures do teach that faith is a gift of God. See Ezek. 36:26; Matt. 11:25–27; John 3:3–8; 6:44, 65; Acts 13:48; 16:14; 1 Cor. 2:4–5, 14; 12:3; Eph. 2:1–10; 1 Thess. 1:5, 6; 2:13.

⁵ For more observations on this circularity, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130–33; my *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 9–14; and my *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 299–309.

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confirm faith. Scripture itself frequently calls upon people to look at the evidences of the truth (Ps. 19:1; Luke 1:1–3; John 20:30–31; Acts 1:1–3; 26:26; Rom. 1:19–20). Biblical religion is unique in its appeal to history as the locus of divine revelation. God has revealed himself plainly in nature and in historical events.

The content of faith, Scripture, may transcend reason in these senses: (1) it cannot be proved by human reason alone; (2) it contains mysteries, even apparent contradictions, that cannot be fully resolved by human logic; (3) only the Spirit, not reason alone, can create belief from the heart, overcoming the sinful impulse toward unbelief. There is no conflict between faith and reason, however, when the latter functions in accord with God's norms.

3

THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF SIN

Of course human reasoning in the present age is never completely free from the influence of sin. Therefore, we must now discuss the nature of unbelief, of disobedience to God's words, and how that unbelief affects knowledge and reasoning—what theologians call the “noetic effects of sin.”

Those who deny God do so, not because they lack evidence, but because their hearts are rebellious. In Romans 1:19–20, the apostle Paul says that

what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

Paul even says that they “knew God” (v. 21). God's revelation is clear, but fallen human beings “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (v. 18). So the unbeliever's problem is first ethical, and only secondarily intellectual. His intellectual problems stem from his ethical unwillingness to acknowledge the evidence. Unbelief distorts human thought.

From unbelief, then, comes the “wisdom of the world” that Paul contrasts so sharply with the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:18–2:16; 3:18–23; 8:1–3), the foolishness that the author of Proverbs sets over against true wisdom. The wisdom of the world tends to dominate human cultures as they unite in defiance of God. Those considered wise, influential, and noble (1 Cor. 1:26) according to the world's standards are experts in this false wisdom, and they are honored for it. In our day, this “conventional wisdom” dominates mainstream politics, education, arts, science, media, and religion. To such “wise” people,

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Christianity appears foolish and weak. But to God, the opposite is the case. It is the secular wisdom that is foolish and weak, and the worldly wise will learn that in God's time.

Though the unbeliever⁶ suppresses the truth, he sometimes acknowledges it in spite of himself. He lives, after all, in God's world, and he must accept that objective world if he is to continue living at all. So Jesus taught that "the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light" (Luke 16:8). Jesus also regarded the Pharisees as people with many true ideas but devoid of real heart obedience. He urged his disciples to accept their teaching but not to follow the example of their behavior (Matt. 23:2–3). Even the demons sometimes face up to reality. In Mark 1:24 an evil spirit says truly that Jesus is the "Holy One of God." Nevertheless, like Satan and the demons, the unbeliever seeks to escape from the truth. Ultimately, he would like to see God replaced by Satan as the Lord of the universe and the truth replaced by Satan's lie.

When someone recognizes the truth but seeks to repress it, the result is irrationality. In some cases, we call such repression "wishful thinking." Sometimes there is psychological repression, in which a person relegates the truth to some subconscious level of the mind. Other times, the truth and error simply exist side by side, interacting in odd ways, creating contradictions in thought and life. For example, the unbeliever may accept historical evidences for Wellington's defeat of Napoleon, while denying equally cogent evidences for the resurrection of Jesus. This sort of inconsistency does not come from a mere lack of intelligence. It has, rather, a spiritual root.⁷ It comes from living in God's world with a mind created to acknowledge God, but with a disposition of resistance and rebellion against him.

So the paradigm of irrationality is Satan himself. Satan knows more about God than any of us. He is not stupid: certainly he knows that rebels against God are doomed. Yet he persists in his rebellion anyway. So, intelligent as he may be, he is the very paradigm of foolishness.

⁶ All that I say about the individual unbeliever can also be applied to the corporate conventional wisdoms, that is, to the wisdom of the world described earlier.

⁷ Presuppositional apologists have found it difficult to formulate precisely how it is that truth and error coexist in the unbelieving mind. Cornelius Van Til, who rarely admitted that there were difficulties in his apologetic system, recognized that this was a "difficult point"; see his *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 26. In my view, Van Til's own formulations are somewhat inconsistent, though some are insightful. See *Cornelius Van Til*, 187–213.

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Cornelius Van Til⁸ maintained that every unbeliever is both rationalistic and irrationalistic at the same time—irrationalistic by denying the only possible source of order and meaning in the universe, rationalistic in setting himself or herself in the place of God as the ultimate determiner of truth and falsity. So it is not unusual for modern secularists to claim that all truth is relative while insisting that naturalistic evolution is a proven fact, never conscious of the contradiction into which they have fallen.

5

In the philosophical tradition of the West, some thinkers have been relativists and skeptics, like the Greek sophists and the contemporary postmodernists. These emphasize the irrationalism of unbelief. But they are also rationalistic, for they dogmatically affirm their skepticism, their sophism, or their postmodernism as if it were objectively true.

Other philosophers have been mainly rationalistic, like Parmenides, Spinoza, and Hegel, who believed that autonomous human reason is the ultimate standard of truth. But most students of philosophy agree that these men failed in their attempts to build up the whole fabric of human knowledge based on autonomous reason. Their defense of rationalism requires a certain amount of mythology (in the case of Parmenides), unargued assumptions (Descartes and Spinoza), or a dialectical self-negation that devours itself (Hegel).

Still other philosophers, the greater ones, like Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, have tried to be rationalistic about one sector of the world (form for the Greeks, the phenomenal for Kant) and irrationalistic about another (matter or the noumenal, respectively). But for such thinkers there is no possibility of achieving a unified vision of reality. Neither rationalism nor irrationalism can be confined; each demands total sovereignty over human thought. If part of the universe is irrational, autonomous reason cannot be the ultimate criterion of truth. If part of the universe is accessible to autonomous reason, irrationalism cannot succeed in its attempt to deny the existence of objective truth.

THE NOETIC EFFECTS OF CONVERSION

Becoming a Christian does not immediately erase all sin and its effects. For Jesus' sake, God forgives our sins; but we will not be sinlessly perfect until we enter heaven (1 John 1:8–10). In this life, we do commit sin, and we struggle to overcome it with God's help. As we have seen, reasoning is part of life, and it is subject to ethical predication: it can be done righteously or sinfully. So God deals with our sinful reasoning as he deals with all

⁸ In *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), he traces this dualism back to the Garden of Eden: Eve was an irrationalist, denying any authoritative interpretation of the tree of knowledge; but she was also a rationalist, claiming the right to make such authoritative interpretations herself. See *Cornelius Van Til*, 231–38.

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our sins. He forgives our noetic sins in Christ; but we do sin with the mind as well as with the body until we enter glory.

What is the difference, then, between believer and unbeliever? Both commit sin, and both grasp the truth in some measure. But neither is perfect, and neither is as bad as the devil. Is the difference between the two only a difference in degree?

No, the differences are too substantial to be described as mere differences in degree. The new Christian is regenerate, born again (John 3:3), a new creation, in whom all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17). Conversion involves repentance, a decisive turning away from sin, and faith, a decisive turning to Christ. And every believer is united to Christ in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6; 1 Cor. 15). The change is not a change from sin to sinlessness, but it is a radical change in *direction*. Before conversion we love sin and want to indulge in it more and more. After conversion we hate sin, and our deepest desire is to be rid of it. Another way to put it is that before conversion sin is our *master*; after conversion, our master is Christ (John 8:31–36; Rom. 6:14).

Intellectual change is part of that. Christians do sometimes engage in reasoning distorted by the ideal of autonomy. But that is not the deepest desire of their hearts. They have repented of that autonomy and have sought wisdom in Christ alone (1 Cor. 1:30). So sinful thinking does not master them. They have that fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom.

We have seen how important it is to think of epistemology in ethical terms, but ethics isn't all there is to epistemology. The epistemologist must also wrestle with such matters as the relation between sense experience and reason; the precise nature of belief, of justification for belief, and of truth; and other matters that we cannot discuss in detail here. But the connection between ethics and epistemology is a biblical datum of special importance for apologetics. Reasoning is good or bad, right or wrong, in God's sight, just like other human actions. After the fall of Adam, human reason operated in defiance of God.⁹ Through Christ, God forgives our proud, false wisdom and grants intellectual repentance, giving us a new heart's desire to think God's thoughts after him.

⁹ I am not saying that reason became less efficient. As I have indicated, unbelievers are often more brilliant than believers, using their reason in the service of falsehood. Van Til likens fallen reason to a buzz saw that works well except for being pointed in the wrong direction.

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THE VALUE OF APOLOGETICS

Jesus calls his people to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19). Apologetics is part of that discipling or teaching ministry. Scripture mentions that aspect of the teaching ministry in 1 Peter 3:15, where the apostle tells us,

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.¹⁰

Paul also speaks of his ministry as including the defense and confirmation of the gospel (Phil. 1:7; cf. v. 16). He tells the Corinthians, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Indeed, all biblical writers speak rationally to their readers, offering reasons for believing the truths God has given them.

Apologetics has value for both believers and unbelievers, since even believers in this life must wrestle with their unbelief (Mark 9:24). I understand it to have three elements: (1) *proof*, rational confirmation for faith; (2) *defense*, replies to criticisms; and (3) *offense*, bringing criticisms against non-Christian ideas. Each of these contributes to the others, so the three elements cannot be sharply separated.

As “Reformed epistemologists”¹¹ have emphasized, we do legitimately believe most things without proof or argument. This is obviously the case with young children, but it is also the case with adults, and with some of our fundamental beliefs: the belief that there is an external world beyond our own mind, the belief that other people have minds like ours, the belief that the future will resemble the past, and so on. I also agree with the Reformed epistemologists that it is quite legitimate for someone to believe in Christ without basing that belief on some argument or other. The Spirit creates faith in the heart, as we have seen, and that faith may or may not arise through an argumentative process. I do believe that faith is always (logically, not causally) based on *evidence*. Romans 1:18–

¹⁰ Note that life as well as word plays an important role in apologetics — another confirmation of the relation between ethics and knowledge.

¹¹ See the discussion of Reformed epistemology elsewhere in this volume (pp. 266–84). In my view, presuppositionalism is also a “Reformed epistemology,” since it is deeply influenced by the great Reformed thinkers John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, and Cornelius Van Til. Indeed, I think presuppositionalism makes a more profound use of Reformed convictions than does the Plantinga version. But I won’t try to make the historical argument here.

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32 makes clear that the evidence of the natural world yields knowledge of God in every human being, a knowledge that many suppress. But argument is not strictly necessary for faith.¹² The importance of apologetics, then, is not that one can't believe without it; it is rather that apologetic arguments can articulate and confirm the knowledge of God that we all have from creation.

Some have raised another question about the value of apologetics, based on the biblical teachings discussed in previous sections of this paper. One problem is this: If we are to *presuppose* the truth of Christianity in all our thinking, then how can an argument help to confirm that presupposition? If we presuppose that God's Word is true, then its truth is assured at the beginning of the argument. But if the truth of Christianity is assured already at the beginning of the argument, what can the argument add to that assurance? Here, it seems, another form of circularity vitiates the process of reasoning. But that is not the case. Recall the logical chain between God's rationality → our faith → our reasoning. The chain, as we have seen, is linear, rather than circular. But once the Spirit plants faith in our heart, our reasoning reflects God's and therefore puts into our thoughts and language the divine rationality that began the chain. The third link reflects the first and thus grants assurance. So the ground of faith becomes more evident to us, and God thereby confirms our faith to us.

Practically speaking: as we read the Bible, and as we look at God's world with biblical presuppositions (what Calvin called "the spectacles of Scripture"), the gospel becomes more reasonable to us, more cogent. After all, when we think with biblical presuppositions, we are thinking the way God designed us to think. Thus, our thinking is energized, empowered. Things that once seemed incredible now seem like obvious truth. One who thinks according to secular presuppositions, for example, may find it very difficult to believe in the biblical miracles. But once one begins to think according to the biblical worldview, in which the world is governed by a personal God rather than impersonal forces, it is not at all hard to believe in miracles. If God exists, miracles are possible.

But are we not still forced to say, "God exists (presupposition), therefore God exists (conclusion)," and isn't that argument clearly circular? Yes, in a way. But that is unavoidable for any system, any worldview. For God is the ultimate standard of meaning, truth, and rationality. For a philosophical rationalist, human reason is the

¹² Argument and evidence, of course, are not the same thing. Evidence is those objective facts in the world that warrant a conclusion. Argument is our attempt to show in words how that conclusion is warranted by the facts. But in most of life's situations, we simply draw conclusions from the facts themselves without formulating arguments. It is helpful to note that animals respond to evidence, but they do not formulate arguments.

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ultimate standard. But how can the rationalist argue that position? He must, in the final analysis, say, "Reason is the ultimate standard because reason says so." Or if a Muslim believes that Allah is the standard of rationality, he must argue that Allah is the standard because Allah says so. One cannot argue for an ultimate standard by appealing to a different standard. That would be inconsistent.

So there is a kind of circle here. But even this circle, as I indicated earlier, is linear in a sense. For it is a movement from God's truth, to the gift of faith, to the reflection of God's truth in human reasoning.

A more difficult question: Of what value is this argument to the unbeliever? How can a Christian ask a non-Christian to believe in Christ on Christian presuppositions? The unbeliever, by definition of "unbeliever," does not have those presuppositions. So how can he or she be expected to employ them in the apologetic encounter? Here, several points should be noted:

1. Faith is a demand of God. He calls us in Scripture to repent and believe in Christ (Matt. 3:2; 4:17; John 14:1; Acts 2:38; 16:31). God commands us to do many things that we cannot do in our own strength. To summarize, he calls us to please him in all we do; but apart from grace none of us can please him at all (Rom. 8:7–8). Similarly, the command to believe is one we cannot carry out in our own strength. It requires the grace of God. So in the present context we may say, yes, the unbeliever cannot think according to Christian presuppositions;¹³ but that is nevertheless what God demands. And the inquirer will do so, if (and only if) in the course of the apologetic encounter God plants faith in his heart. The apologist can do no more than proclaim the truth, trusting that God will plant faith if and when he wills.

2. The apologetic argument based on biblical presuppositions conveys truth, and certainly the work of apologetics is to communicate truth. If we abandoned our biblical presuppositions, claiming a position of "neutrality,"¹⁴ then at that point we would be telling a lie to the inquirer. There is no such neutrality, and the very idea of neutrality is at the heart of Satan's deception of those who are lost. To claim neutrality is to claim that *I* am the one who ultimately decides what is true or false, that *I* am on the intellectual

¹³ Again, I am referring here to the unbeliever's *dominant* presuppositions. As I said before, unbelievers often think Christianly in spite of themselves.

¹⁴ A position of neutrality would either be a state of mind without any presuppositions at all (impossible, because everyone must enter the discussion with a criterion of truth), or a set of presuppositions acceptable either to God or Satan (impossible, because no one can serve two masters [Matt. 6:24]). He who is not with Jesus is against him [Matt. 12:30]).

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throne. Such neutralist pretensions must be rebuked, not indulged. They are a form of pride, of which God commands the sinner to repent.

3. Whether unbelievers admit it or not, God made them to think with the Christian-theistic worldview as their presupposition. And at one level of their consciousness, they do think that way. Remember that Romans 1:21 describes them as knowing God from the created world yet suppressing that knowledge. So we may ask the unbeliever to think on Christian presuppositions, because in one sense he already does.¹⁵ Our plea is that he drop the unbelieving presuppositions that dominate his thought and give heed to those principles that he knows but suppresses.

4. Knowledge suppressed creates contradiction in thought and life. Part of the unbeliever says that God's revelation is true; part of him says it is false. He holds contradictory beliefs simultaneously, with corresponding confusion in his decisions, actions, and feelings. The apologist should appeal to the part of the unbeliever that acknowledges God in spite of himself, to that knowledge which the unbeliever keeps trying to suppress. We can do that only by reasoning consistently on biblical presuppositions.

5. The apologist, then, may and should legitimately require the unbeliever to reason on Christian presuppositions. That is nothing less than the demand of God. But this demand may be made in subtle ways. One way, suggested by Cornelius Van Til, is to ask the unbeliever to present his own system for analysis. The apologist agrees to accept the unbeliever's presuppositions "for the sake of argument," for the purpose of showing that these provide no basis at all for meaning and truth. The Christian then asks the unbeliever to accept the Christian presuppositions, also "for the sake of argument." If the inquirer wishes, he may attempt to reduce the Christian position to absurdity. But we trust that he cannot do that. Thus, indirectly, we display the necessity of adopting Christian presuppositions as our ultimate standard of truth, and we communicate God's demand that the inquirer adopt those presuppositions in all his thought. But we present that demand subtly, in a way that continues, rather than terminates, the discussion.

¹⁵ Indeed, there is a sense in which all of the unbeliever's *thinking* is Christian. Christian presuppositions are the only way to *think*. The alternative is not thought, but meaninglessness.

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APOLOGETIC METHOD

Presuppositionalist apologetics focuses on the above biblical teachings and draws various conclusions in regard to apologetic method:¹⁶

1. The goal of apologetics is to evoke or strengthen faith, not merely to bring intellectual persuasion. Directed toward unbelievers, it is an aspect of evangelism; toward believers, it is training in godliness. It is possible to be intellectually persuaded of a theistic worldview, as were the Pharisees, without a real heart commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Furthermore, everyone has the intellectual knowledge required for faith. The need of the unbeliever is not for more information, but for God's grace motivating a heart change. It may of course be necessary for the apologist to bring factual information to the inquirer in order to challenge him to rethink the data. But the apologist seeks above all to be a channel through whom God's Spirit can bring repentance (including intellectual repentance) and faith.

2. Apologists, therefore, must resist temptations to contentiousness or arrogance. They must avoid the feeling that they are entering into a contest to prove themselves to be righter or smarter than the inquirers with whom they deal. I believe that kind of pride is a besetting sin of many apologists, and we need to deal with it. First Peter 3:15–16 focuses, surprisingly, not on the brilliance, cogency, or eloquence of apologists, but on their character: they must answer unbelievers with “gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience.” Peter here tells us that a consistent Christian life plays a major role in the work of apologetics. Christianity is not just an intellectual system, but a comprehensive way of life. Nothing is more persuasive than a concrete, consistent

¹⁶ Many apologists have been called presuppositionalists, such as Cornelius Van Til, Francis Schaeffer, Gordon H. Clark, Carl F. H. Henry, and Greg L. Bahnsen. Even Edward J. Carnell was called a “modified presuppositionalist.” My own approach owes more to Van Til than to anyone else, but in this essay I will speak only for myself. I have interacted with Van Til's writings (both positively and negatively) in *Apologetics to the Glory of God* and in *Cornelius Van Til*.

I wish we could find a better term than *presuppositional* to describe this chapter's approach to apologetics. In the apologetic literature, writers regularly contrast “presupposition” with “evidence,” so that to call a method “presuppositional” may imply that that method disparages evidence. That is certainly not my intention. Further, the term *presuppositional* doesn't express very well the distinctives of this approach. Any apologetic method worth its salt must discuss the presuppositions that Christians and non-Christians bring to the apologetic encounter, and many apologists do this who would not want to be described as presuppositionalists. Nevertheless, because the term has achieved wide currency, I will employ it here.

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example of that way of life,¹⁷ and nothing is more detrimental to our witness than when our life betrays our message by our failing to show the gentleness and love of Jesus.

3. Our apologetic should take special pains to present God as he really is: as the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth, who alone saves his people from their sins. As the Creator of all things and the one who directs the course of nature and history by his providence (Rom. 8:28; Eph. 1:11), God is the source of all meaning and rationality. Our argument should lead to such a God. So we should not mislead unbelievers into assuming that they can understand any fact adequately without confessing its relation to God. We should make plain that even our methods of knowledge, our standards of truth and falsity, our views of logic, and our scientific methods must be reconciled first of all with God's revelation.

4. As such, our argument should be *transcendental*. That is, it should present the biblical God, not merely as the conclusion to an argument, but as the one who makes argument possible. We should present him as the source of all meaningful communication, since he is the author of all order, truth, beauty, goodness, logical validity, and empirical fact.

5. We can reach this transcendental conclusion by many kinds of specific arguments, including many of the traditional ones.¹⁸ The traditional cosmological argument, for example, argues that God must exist as the First Cause of all the causes in the world. That conclusion is biblical and true, and if it can be drawn from true premises and valid logic, it may contribute to the goal of a transcendental conclusion. Certainly if God is the author of all meaning, he is the author of causality. And if God is the author of causality, the cause of all causes, he is the cause of all meaning. Therefore, the causal argument yields a transcendental conclusion.

If the argument is to be sound, however, we must, of course, interpret causality in a way that is itself consistent with the God of the Bible, risking the charge of circularity that

¹⁷ Francis and Edith Schaeffer led many to Christ through their ministry at L'Abri in Switzerland. In my view, the power of their ministry was found in the combination of a thoughtful apologetic ("honest answers to honest questions") and a loving ministry of hospitality.

¹⁸ Here my concept of transcendental argument differs somewhat from that of Van Til and other presuppositionalists. See my discussion in *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 69–88, and *Cornelius Van Til*, 241–97, 311–22. I think Van Til exaggerates the differences between his presuppositionalism and the approaches of the older apologetic tradition. In my view, presuppositionalism should not be seen as the *antithesis* of "classical" or "traditional" or "evidential" apologetics, but as a Christian epistemology that seeks to supplement, clarify, and sharpen the traditional approaches with biblical teachings that are at least sometimes overlooked, or even contradicted, in the tradition.

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we discussed earlier. We should not suggest that the unbeliever can assume some secular philosophical concept of causality (like those of Aristotle, Hume, or Kant) and reason from that.¹⁹ Causality itself is not a religiously neutral notion, providing a common ground between believing and unbelieving worldviews, from which Christian conclusions can be reached. No, without God there would be no causal order, nor any possibility of causal argument.

6. Negatively, we should not say things to the unbeliever that tend to reinforce his pretense to autonomy or neutrality. For example, the great eighteenth-century apologist Joseph Butler said, "Let reason be kept to: and if any part of the Scripture account of the redemption of the world by Christ can be shown to be really contrary to it, let the Scripture, in the name of God, be given up."²⁰ This statement (like Butler's writing in general) fails to distinguish between reasoning on Christian presuppositions and reasoning on non-Christian ones. Therefore, it gives the impression that one may use the principles of reason advocated by secular philosophy to judge the truth of Scripture. For Immanuel Kant, it was axiomatic that reason should never accept any conclusion on the basis of a religious revelation alone. Would Butler have been pleased to judge the Scriptures by reason so defined? Butler seeks to find common ground with his non-Christian readers, but in doing so he greatly misleads them. The same criticism applies to the following passage from Edward J. Carnell: "Bring on your revelations! Let them make peace with the law of contradiction and the facts of history and they will deserve a rational man's assent. A careful examination of the Bible reveals that it passes these stringent examinations *summa cum laude*."²¹

This statement too, though eloquent, is highly misleading. It fails to distinguish between rationality governed by biblical principle and rationality governed by the denial of God's revelation. Thus, it conveys the notion that the latter appropriately judges the truth of Scripture. Reasoning based on biblical presuppositions, of course, is a reliable guide to truth. God gave it to us for that purpose. But Carnell's and Butler's formulations leave the crucial issue ambiguous.

7. The actual arguments we use in an apologetic witness will vary considerably, depending on who we are talking to. Apologetics is "person variable."²² We must ask where the inquirer is coming from, his educational level, previous philosophical

¹⁹ David Hume, for example, taught that there was no necessary connection between cause and effect. On this basis, one cannot infer the nature of a first cause behind the universe.

²⁰ Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1865), 245.

²¹ Edward J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 178.

²² See George Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (New York: Random House, 1970).

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commitments, interests, seriousness, specific questions, and so on. Our goal is not to persuade rational creatures in the abstract, but to persuade the person we are talking to, with God's help.

A traditional causal argument, for example, might be persuasive to one person but not to another. The argument may be perfectly valid and sound from a logical standpoint, but it may be too complex or abstract for the second person. Some people, finding no fault in it, may still reject it, because they are strongly disposed toward skepticism, and they figure that an argument that complex must have some flaws even if they cannot identify them.

Often, one can focus in on the specific concerns of the inquirer by pursuing a *negative* argument, or *reductio ad absurdum*. Here we ask the inquirer to explain his own worldview, epistemology, and/or theory of value, and then we try to show that his unbelieving premises lead to a denial of meaning itself. I do not agree with some of my presuppositionalist colleagues that the *reductio* is the *only* argument compatible with biblical teaching,²³ but I believe it is very useful. It focuses on the inquirer's specific form of unbelief, and it focuses the dialogue on the transcendental conclusion.

8. It is especially useful when we can show how the errors of non-Christian worldviews arise, not merely from logical mistakes or factual inaccuracy, but from religious rebellion. Certainly unbelievers do make factual and logical mistakes. We do too, and each party should be free to expose these in the other. But since our goal is conversion, not merely intellectual persuasion, it is important to show how unbelief itself is a systematic source of error. We have seen how all unbelieving positions lead to the dead ends of rationalism and irrationalism. These can be avoided only through intellectual repentance, through turning to the true God. Thus, we expose the true nature of unbelief, not as a neutral or unbiased attempt to account for experience, but as a flight from the God we all know. And so apologetics merges easily into evangelism.

SKETCH OF AN APOLOGETIC

Here I would like to give an example of what an argument following the above principles might look like. This is only one of many possible arguments, for apologetics, as we have seen, is person variable. And this argument is only a sketch; I cannot here present all the clarifications, disclaimers, subarguments, answers to objections,

²³ See references in n. 16 above.

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documentations, and so on that I would include in a longer formulation.²⁴ I am addressing college-level readers.

As we think about “where it all came from,” many answers have been suggested, and these answers can be classified in many ways. But let me suggest as a fruitful approach dividing the possible answers into two: personal and impersonal. In our experience, we are familiar with persons, and we are familiar with impersonal things and forces, like rocks, the law of gravity, and so on. The significant question is, which of these is more fundamental? Are persons made by impersonal objects and forces, so that you and I are “nothing but” matter, motion, time, and chance?²⁵ Or are the impersonal forces created and employed by a person? Is the universe, then, fundamentally personal or fundamentally impersonal?

Of all the religions and philosophies of the world, only those influenced by the Bible are personalistic in this sense.²⁶ Polytheistic religions have personal gods, but these personal gods are not ultimate; they are finite, themselves subject to larger forces. Hinduism presents Brahma as a kind of absolute reality, but Brahma is not personal, nor is the Buddhist nothingness, or the Platonic forms, or the Hegelian absolute. Only in biblical religion is there a personal absolute, a being who is truly ultimate, but who also plans, speaks, thinks, acts in history, rejoices, grieves, loves, and judges.²⁷

Thus, the issue before us is this: Does the biblical God exist, or is the universe the result of impersonal things and processes? If you are undecided but fair-minded, you should give each of these hypotheses an equal hearing. Certainly it is not obvious that the biblical God *doesn't* exist. How could anybody establish the nonexistence of God? Negatives are notoriously hard to prove. You would need omniscience to know that there is no God anywhere in the universe. And, of course, if you were omniscient, then you would be God, and the contrary would be proven.

²⁴ For additional and more complete examples of presuppositional argument, see my *Apologetics to the Glory of God*.

²⁵ I gratefully acknowledge Francis Schaeffer (in many of his writings) as the source of this fourfold analysis of impersonal reality.

²⁶ Some philosophical systems that have been called personalistic, such as those of Borden Bowne and Edgar S. Brightman, are not so on my definition, for in these systems God is finite and to that extent subordinate to other realities. In these systems, the personal is not truly ultimate.

²⁷ Of course Islam, Judaism, and various sects like the Jehovah's Witnesses also approximate biblical personalism, though I think inconsistently. But their personalism, such as it is, is due to the influence of Scripture.

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Since it is impossible to prove the nonexistence of God, we should at least be willing to give the theistic hypothesis a fair hearing. But such a fair hearing is rare in our society. Among the mainstream intellectuals and opinion-makers, the personalistic option is laughed away or not even considered. Writers on ethics usually do not even consider the possibility that our behavior is subject to the commands of a divine lawgiver. Although many scientists are Christians, it is rare to see mainstream scientists admitting that God may have played a role in the natural history of the universe.²⁸ There is a significant Christian influence among professional philosophers today, but most philosophers still develop their theories on the assumption that impersonal explanations are more satisfactory than personal ones, and that religious revelation is irrelevant to the work of understanding the universe—the same for sociologists, psychologists, novelists, filmmakers, economists, political scientists, educators, jurists, and so on. In the current intellectual climate, autonomy is the rule. Even if there is a God, and even if he has revealed himself, so goes the assumption, his revelation must be subject to our standards, rather than the other way around.²⁹

Why do you suppose it is that today's society so universally *assumes* the impersonalist option even though it cannot be proved? Could that assumption illustrate the Bible's teaching that people voluntarily repress the knowledge of the true God because they don't *like* to worship him (Rom. 1:18, 28)? The assumption is not a rational one; perhaps it is wishful thinking. Or perhaps it is based on a kind of faith, religious in essence but opposed to Christian faith.

There are many possible benefits in considering the personalistic alternative. Belief in the biblical God yields clear moral standards, for example, something that our society desperately needs. It assures us that there is meaning and purpose in life. It shows us that love, wisdom, beauty, and truth are at the foundation of the universe, not the periphery. History exists to manifest and glorify the divine personality.

²⁸ Phillip Johnson makes important observations in this regard. See his *Reason in the Balance* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

²⁹ As Johnson (*ibid.*) points out, the argument is often made that theistic personalism must be excluded from schools, courts, and other forums of public discourse, because it is a "religious" view. I will not address here the arguments about the so-called wall of separation between government and religion. However, (1) since impersonalism cannot be proved, it must confess that it too is based on faith of a sort; and (2) the quest for truth can only be hindered if serious alternatives are dismissed in this way. It is more important whether a position is true or false than whether it is religious or nonreligious. "Religious" is often a nasty name that people give to a viewpoint in order to keep it from being discussed.

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But does this God exist? At some level of our consciousness, we know that he does. We assume, for example, that the laws of logic and mathematics³⁰ are universally and necessarily true. $2+2 = 4$ does not just happen to be true; it *must* be true. And it is not true only in our part of the universe, but in every part. Now there is nothing in matter, motion, time, and chance that accounts for such universal necessity. But a personal God, who himself is logical, will naturally create a world that reflects his own perfect thought. Our assumption about logic fits the personal model of the universe, not the impersonal.

We also normally consider the fundamental principles of morality to be universal and necessary. Some do argue for ethical relativism, the view that ethical values are mere feelings of disapproval conferred by evolution. But few if any of us actually believe that fundamental ethical principles are relative. We are enraged at unkindness, cruelty, and unfairness, especially when we are the objects of them. And we refuse to believe that our rage is just a feeling, like a taste for hamburgers. People who are cruel have done what they ought not to have done. They have violated objective rules that are everywhere in force. Even if they belong to a very different culture from our own and live at a great distance from us, we hold them responsible to these objective norms.³¹

The main opposition today to objective norms comes from what is called “postmodernism.”³² The name comes from the view that “modern” thinking must be overcome. “Modern” thinking assumes the competence and goodness of secularized reason, technology, and the institutions of Western civilization. In turn, this confidence presupposes that there is a single objective truth accessible to human reason through logical and scientific methods. Postmodernism, however, denies that there is any one set of rules (*grand récit*, “metanarrative”) for finding truth. There is on this view a multitude of criteria held by different people, different groups, in different settings, that may or may not be consistent with one another. Indeed, there is not even an authoritative way of interpreting any piece of language. The author’s intention is not authoritative, for the meaning of language is independent of any individual intention.

³⁰ A similar argument could be made concerning the laws of nature. Compare the taped debate between the late Greg Bahnsen, presuppositional apologist, and Gordon Stein, defender of atheism. This and other Bahnsen tapes are available from Covenant Media Foundation, (870)-775-1170. Their web site is <http://www.cmfnow.com>.

³¹ Objective ethical norms are necessary also for logic and science. Because if there is no absolute rule as to how I *ought* to reason, as to the *responsible* way of analyzing data, logic and science could not exist nor could any other field of human study.

³² An excellent introduction to postmodernism is William Edgar, “No News Is Good News: Modernity, the Postmodern, and Apologetics,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 359–82.

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Postmodernists are open to various kinds of mystical or symbolic ways of understanding,³³ but they deny any sort of objective truth. In Van Til's terms, they emphasize the irrationalist pole of unbelief's rationalist-irrationalist dialectic.³⁴ The claim of objective truth, in their somewhat Marxian view, is an oppressive claim. It amounts to oppression: males dominating women, whites dominating blacks, Westerners dominating other cultures, rich dominating the poor.

Certainly the postmodernists are right to protest the proud claims of modernist rationality. And, as a presuppositionalist, I appreciate their observation that all claims to knowledge are governed by presuppositions, that nobody is simply "neutral." Postmodernists understand that things look differently depending on where you sit. Literature looks different to women than to men, to poor than to rich, and so on. And certainly they are right to say that claims to objective truth can be means of oppression.³⁵ But to reject objective truth entirely is quite impossible. Postmodernists inevitably exempt their own writings from this kind of criticism. Edgar points out that

Christopher Norris has shown how a scholar like Stanley Fish, in his vehement attacks on theory as a mere justification for personal preference, perpetuates the illusion that he is somehow outside of the confines of that personal preference.... The most serious flaw in [Jean-François] Lyotard's presentation, however, is the deep-rooted contradiction between his claims to do away with metanarrative and his own program, which is suspiciously like a metanarrative of another kind.³⁶

If postmodernists want to be consistent in denying objective truth,³⁷ they should abandon the attempt to persuade others of the truth of their position. What could that "truth" be if it is not objective truth? But if they want to set forth their position as objectively true, then their viewpoint must be substantially revised. We shall, therefore, set

³³ Postmodernists are more or less allied with the neo-Gnostic New Age spiritualities described in Peter Jones, *Spirit Wars* (Escondido, Calif.: Main Entry, 1997). His discussions there are worth noting.

³⁴ But of course they are rationalistic in the dogmatism by which they assert their view. The rationalist pole in our society is emphasized by the naturalistic scientism discussed by Johnson in the work cited above. That naturalistic scientism is, however, irrationalist, in that it has no rational basis for its dogmatism.

³⁵ Some applications postmodernists are not inclined to make: dogmatism about women's rights is oppressive to unborn children; dogmatism about evolution is oppressive to Christians; dogmatism about the "separation of church and state" oppresses public school students who are trying to find truth.

³⁶ Edgar, "No News Is Good News," 379. He cites Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong With Postmodernism?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), chap. 2.

³⁷ But what would "consistency" mean if objectivity is excluded?

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postmodernism aside and assume, as most everyone does, the objectivity of logical and moral norms.

What could be the basis of objective moral norms? Again, nothing in matter, motion, time, or chance can generate moral criteria. Many philosophers have pointed out that ethical values cannot be deduced from valueless facts: “is” does not imply “ought.” What other source can there be? Here we should remember how we learned morality: usually from our parents, teachers, and others in society. Like other obligations, ethical obligation is an obligation to persons. Absolute obligations, therefore, can only be obligations to an absolute person. Just as only a person can generate logical and physical laws that are universal and necessary, so only a person can generate absolute and general moral obligations.

The above is not exactly a proof of God’s existence; it is rather an analysis of how we usually think, the assumptions we actually make in our thought and life. To my mind, these assumptions show that we actually know God and don’t need proof at all. How do we know God? Through the natural world, which is his creation, and through our own self-consciousness, since we are the image of God. Traditional proofs from causality, purpose, self-consciousness, and so on try to spell out in logical terms how we can move from the data of experience to the conclusion of God. These have their value, but the knowledge of God exists whether we can formulate these logical moves or not.

This God we know. Is he the God of the Bible? Well, if God is a person, we would expect him to reveal himself personally—that is, in language—as well as in nature. And as I indicated earlier, biblical religion is the only fully personalistic faith, so if there is a verbal revelation from God, the Bible would certainly be the leading candidate at the outset of our quest.

Further, the Bible makes historical claims that we may verify historically. We must not, of course, adopt principles of historiography like those of Hume and Kant that make it impossible to verify any supernatural event. If there is a personal God, then supernatural events are possible, and it is possible for that God to reveal them to us. Our principles of historical research must be theistic principles however much that methodology gives the appearance of circularity.³⁸

³⁸ See discussion of circularity earlier in this article.

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We cannot here try to vindicate the historicity of the whole Bible. Many other authors have contributed to this work.³⁹ But central to this effort is the consideration of Jesus. He appears in history doing great signs and wonders and making enormous claims for himself. Make no mistake: Scripture does not claim merely that Jesus was a wise teacher, as Socrates and the Buddha, nor merely a prophet, as Mohammed. In line with Jesus' own claims, the New Testament identifies him with God himself (John 1:1–14; 5:16–27; Col. 1:15–20; 2:9; Heb. 1:1–14;⁴⁰ and many other passages).

Jesus, God the Son, came to earth to die in our place, to die the death that we deserve because of sin (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Over many centuries, prophets foretold that he would come for this purpose (see, e.g., Gen. 3:15; Ps. 22; Isa. 7:14; 9:6–7; 52:13–53:12; Dan. 7:13–14; 9:25–27; Micah 5:2; Zech. 9:9; 12:10; 13:1).⁴¹ He did die, by crucifixion; but it was impossible for death to hold him. He rose from the dead, demonstrating that his claims were true and that God the Father accepted his sacrifice for sin. With him, then, all who belong to him were raised to newness of life, their sins forgiven, in eternal fellowship with God.

The apostles, the earliest Christian preachers, proclaimed boldly that Jesus had risen from the dead. Is this message true? Many have examined the evidences for the resurrection and found them quite overwhelming.⁴² Both Jesus' disciples and his opponents agreed that his tomb was empty. His opponents maintained that the disciples stole the body, but that notion is very implausible. The disciples would not likely have endured persecution and death for a lie. Many claimed to have seen Jesus after his death; the apostle Paul lists five such appearances in 1 Corinthians 15:3–7, one of them to five

³⁹ Here I am happy to salute the evidentialist tradition and to recommend the writings of Craig, Gerstner, McDowell, Moreland, Montgomery, Sproul, and many others. I only wish they were more explicitly theistic in their methodology.

⁴⁰ Here and many other places in the New Testament, writers quote Old Testament passages that speak of God and apply them to Christ.

⁴¹ This list of passages contains striking references to the coming Messiah. But even more striking to me is the structure of Old Testament narrative, which prepares Israel to interpret its needs and God's character in ways that point inevitably to Christ. See *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 136–40, and the remarkable book by Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991).

⁴² Again here the evidentialist literature is useful. See, e.g., William Lane Craig, *Apologetics: An Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 167–206; and his *Knowing the Truth About the Resurrection* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1988); Gary Habermas and Antony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (a debate between a Christian and an atheist), ed. Terry L. Miethe (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987); Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif.: Here's Life, 1979), 179–263.

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hundred people at once. So when Paul was writing, many eyewitnesses were still alive to confirm the truth of this message. The notion that all these appearances were really hallucinations does not bear scrutiny. Hallucinations do not remain constant among many different people in many different settings. Is the resurrection legendary? The time frame is too short for a legend to develop, especially during the lifetimes of people who claimed to be eyewitnesses.

Your full assurance of the truth of the resurrection will come only as you read for yourself. Christians believe that the Holy Spirit accompanies the Bible to bring supernatural persuasion. There are many details, a “ring” of authenticity,⁴³ that are hard to describe in arguments.⁴⁴ At best, the arguments only bear witness to the credibility of the biblical text itself.⁴⁵

As you read, you will learn that you cannot remain the same after receiving this teaching. The gospel calls for a response. God calls you to repent of your sin, to turn away from it, and trust in Jesus as the sufficient sacrifice for sin (John 1:12; 3:16; Acts 2:38–39; Rom. 3:21–25; 6:23). He calls you to worship, honor, and obey Jesus as Lord (Phil. 2:9–11). He calls you to join yourself to a sound church by baptism (Acts 2:38, 42–47) and there to hear God’s Word and worship Jesus with other believers (1 Cor. 14), observing the Lord’s Supper with them (1 Cor. 11:23–32). He asks you to help bear the burdens of other Christians in the church (Gal. 6:2). That is the life of faith. If in this way you believe in Jesus, you know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:11–12). We do not earn eternal life by our good works (Eph. 2:8–10; Titus 3:5), but a genuine faith will prove itself by obedience to the Lord (James 2:14–26).

Our Lord demands and deserves our absolute obedience in every area of our lives (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17), including our thought and reasoning (2 Cor. 10:5). In all of our studies, as well as in our life’s endeavors, we are to think in obedience to God’s revelation in Scripture. Like Abraham Kuyper, we should seek to bring everything human under the dominion of Jesus. We should seek a biblical philosophy, science, education, art, theology, politics, and economics. In none of these areas may we be content with the

⁴³ E.g., the earliest witnesses to the resurrection were women. A fabricated story would not likely have included that detail, because the Jews did not consider women fit to testify in court.

⁴⁴ Recall our earlier distinction between evidence and argument.

⁴⁵ Paul’s *main* argument for the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15 is that the resurrection is part of the apostolic preaching, part of the divine Word revelation. Therefore, we cannot deny it without calling the whole biblical gospel in question. See esp. vv. 1–2, 12–19.

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fashionable secular modes of thinking; we must constantly challenge them. We may never try to remain neutral between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world.

So we come full circle. If you have been persuaded of the argument and have become a Christian, you should also be a presuppositionalist.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Frame, J.M. (2000). "Presuppositional Apologetics". In S. N. Gundry & S. B. Cowan (Eds.), *Five views on apologetics* (pp. 207–231). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.