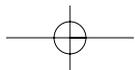
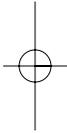
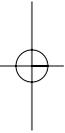
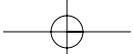
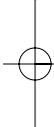
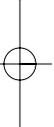


APOLOGETICS TO THE GLORY OF GOD





APOLOGETICS TO THE GLORY OF GOD

AN INTRODUCTION



JOHN M. FRAME


P U B L I S H I N G
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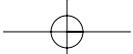
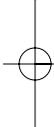
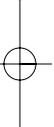
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*To all my students,
from whom I have learned much*



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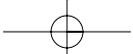
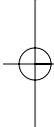
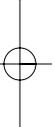
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Preface

As the title indicates, this book is an “introduction” rather than a comprehensive system of apologetics. However, it is intended for people who can do college-level reading and are serious about resolving issues of some difficulty.

Those who want or need a more comprehensive, philosophical background for considering the issues of apologetics should peruse my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. That is a somewhat larger study, presenting the general theory of knowledge which underlies this introduction to apologetics. Many of the points made in this book are discussed there at greater length. The epistemology developed in that book is applied in the present volume to specific apologetic issues. This book will, I trust, be more suitable as a textbook in apologetics.

In good conscience I can describe this volume as “Reformed” apologetics and as belonging to that special kind of Reformed apologetics developed by Cornelius Van Til. I do not necessarily agree with every sentence Van Til wrote; indeed, some Van Tillians will describe this work as “revisionist.” But I believe that Van Til’s approach is still the best foundation for Christian apologetics at the present time. However, although I will refer to Van Til from time to time, it will not be my goal in this book to explain Van Til or to show the pre-

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cise relationships between his ideas and mine. That will come later, God willing. I am preparing another book, which will attempt to comprehensively analyze and evaluate Van Til's work. (I am praying that it will be published in or before 1995, the one hundredth anniversary of his birth.) That book will show more adequately than I can here why I continue to follow, and occasionally depart from, the Van Tillian model.

Why another introduction to apologetics? Well, Van Til's work is still valuable, but it has always been in need of translation into more easily understood language. I think also that it needs some revision, as I have indicated, lest its weaknesses obscure its tremendously important insights. And, apart from the writings of Van Til, few if any introductions to apologetics go to Scripture itself to ask in some detail concerning the norms for apologetics. I hope this book will fill that gap.

One weakness in Van Til's own writings is the lack of specific arguments. Van Til always said that there was an "absolutely certain argument" for Christianity, but he rarely produced an example, except in the barest outline form. I am somewhat less inclined to make the claim of an "absolutely certain argument," for reasons that appear within. But this book does include some specific examples of reasoning which the reader is free to criticize or emulate.

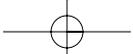
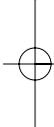
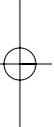
Although this book is a bit heavy on theoretical matters, I realize that the Reformed apologist has a responsibility to speak in ordinary language. Chapter 9 is one step in that direction, although in the final analysis others may be better suited than I to do this kind of popularization. At any rate, if the reader is unsure about his aptitude for or interest in the theoretical portion of this book, he might still find chapter 9 helpful, and I would suggest that he read that chapter first.

Besides Van Til, I am indebted to a great many other people who have, in one way or another, contributed to these thoughts and their publication here. I would like to give special thanks to McIlwain Memorial Presbyterian Church of Pensacola, Florida, for inviting me to lecture at their Pensacola Theological Institute in August, 1990. The institute

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audiences gave me some good feedback and encouragement, motivating me to develop the material (here greatly expanded) for publication.

I am also indebted to a number of friends who read the first draft of this book and gave me much encouragement and many suggestions. Jim Scott did a fine job in editing the manuscript for publication. Special thanks go to Derke Bergsma, Bill Edgar, Thom Notaro, Scott Oliphint, Jim Jordan, and R. C. Sproul, who contributed many helpful ideas concerning both the broad structure of the book and many of its details. I could not accept all of their suggestions (indeed, some of them contradicted others!), but I have taken all of them seriously, and that process of self-critical thought has been invaluable. I trust that this book will, in turn, stimulate others to respond to the apologetic challenge for the love of God and the fulfillment of Jesus' Great Commission.



ONE

Apologetics: The Basics

In 1 Peter 3:15–16, the apostle exhorts his readers:

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.

Definitions

Christian apologetics (which has nothing to do with “apologizing”) seeks to serve God and the church by helping believers to carry out the mandate of 1 Peter 3:15–16. We may define it as *the discipline that teaches Christians how to give a reason for their hope*.¹

¹In *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987)—henceforth cited as *DKG*—which relates apologetics to other forms of human knowledge, I define apologetics as “the application of Scripture to unbelief” (p. 87). That shows that apologetics is part of Christian theology, which I define in general as “the application of Scrip-

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I believe that we can distinguish three aspects of apologetics, which we will discuss in detail in later chapters:

1. *Apologetics as proof*: presenting a rational basis for faith or “proving Christianity to be true.” Jesus and the apostles often offered evidence to people who had difficulty believing that the gospel was true. Note John 14:11; 20:24–31; 1 Corinthians 15:1–11. Believers themselves sometimes doubt, and at that point apologetics becomes useful for them even apart from its role in dialogue with unbelievers. That is to say, apologetics confronts unbelief in the believer as well as in the unbeliever.

2. *Apologetics as defense*: answering the objections of unbeliever. Paul describes his mission as “defending and confirming the gospel” (Phil. 1:7; cf. v. 16). “Confirming” may refer to number 1 above, but “defending” is more specifically focused on giving answers to objections. Much of Paul’s writing in the New Testament is apologetic in this sense. Think of how many times he responds to imaginary (or real) objectors in his letter to the Romans. Think of how often Jesus deals with the objections of religious leaders in the gospel of John.

3. *Apologetics as offense*: attacking the foolishness (Ps. 14:1; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16) of unbelieving thought. In view of the importance of number 2, it is not surprising that some will define apologetics as “the defense of the faith.”² But that definition can be misleading. God calls his people, not only to answer the objections of unbelievers, but also to go on the attack against falsehood. Paul says, “We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge

ture.” The definition given in the present volume arises from 1 Peter 3:15–16 and focuses on the person of the apologist rather than upon the discipline of apologetics in the abstract, but in my view it is logically equivalent to the definition in *DKG*. The “reason for our hope” is precisely the certitude of God’s Word, as we shall see. (Notice, by the way, how a word may have more than one useful definition.)

²Van Til’s major exposition of his apologetics is entitled *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955; 2d ed., 1963). But his apologetics is certainly less “defensive” and more “offensive” than most others.

APOLOGETICS: THE BASICS

of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Non-Christian thinking is “foolishness,” according to Scripture (1 Cor. 1:18–2:16; 3:18–23), and one function of apologetics is to expose that foolishness for what it is.

These three types of apologetics are perspectively related.³ That is to say, each one, done fully and rightly, includes the other two, so that each is a way of looking at (i.e., a perspective upon) the whole apologetic enterprise. To give a full account of the rationale of belief (no. 1), one must vindicate that rationale against the objections (no. 2) and alternatives (no. 3) advanced by unbelievers. Similarly, a full account of number 2 will include numbers 1 and 3, and a full account of number 3 will involve numbers 1 and 2.⁴ So in a way the three forms of apologetics are equivalent. But it is good for us nevertheless to distinguish these perspectives, for they certainly represent genuinely different emphases which complement and strengthen one another. For example, an argument for the existence of God (perspective no. 1) which takes no account of unbelievers’ objections to such arguments (no. 2) or to the ways in which unbelievers satisfy themselves with alternative worldviews (no. 3) will to that extent be a weakened argument. So it is often useful in apologetics to ask whether an argument of type 1 can be improved by some supplemental argumentation of type 2, 3, or both.⁵

Presuppositions

Our theme verse, 1 Peter 3:15, begins by telling us, “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.” The apologist must be a be-

³There are many such relationships in Scripture; see *DKG* for more examples.

⁴So Van Til might well have argued that by “defense of the faith” he intended to include positive evidence for Christianity and attacks on the inadequacies of unbelief.

⁵For students of my three perspectives in *DKG*, constructive apologetics is normative, offensive apologetics is situational, and defensive apologetics is existential. You figure it out!

APOLOGETICS: THE BASICS

liever in Christ, committed to the lordship of Christ (cf. Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11).⁶

Some theologians present apologetics as if it were almost an exception to this commitment. They tell us that when we argue with unbelievers, we should not argue on the basis of criteria or standards derived from the Bible. To argue that way, they say, would be biased. We should rather present to the unbeliever an unbiased argument, one that makes no religious assumptions pro or con, one that is neutral. We should, on this view, use criteria and standards that the unbeliever himself can accept. So logic, facts, experience, reason, and such become the sources of truth. Divine revelation, especially Scripture, is systematically excluded.⁷

This argument may appear to be simple common sense: since God and Scripture are precisely the matters in question, we obviously must not make assumptions about them in our argument. That would be circular thinking. It would also put an end to evangelism, for if we demand that the unbeliever assume God's existence and the authority of Scripture in order to enter the debate, he will never consent. Communication between believer and unbeliever will be impossible. Therefore, we must avoid making any such demands and seek to argue on a neutral basis. We may even boast to the unbeliever that our argument presupposes only the criteria that he himself readily accepts (whether logic, fact, consistency, or whatever).

This sort of apologetic is sometimes called the traditional or classical method,⁸ because it claims many advocates down

⁶*DKG* includes quite a bit of reflection on the centrality of Jesus' lordship in Scripture, Christian theology, and the Christian life. In the light of this central and pervasive biblical teaching, recent assertions that one can be a believer without trusting Jesus as Lord must be rejected as not only wrong but wrongheaded. On the other hand, this teaching must not be confused with perfectionism. The sincere confession that Jesus is Lord marks the beginning, indeed the essence, of the Christian's testimony, but the young Christian only gradually and progressively comes to understand and act upon the full implications of Jesus' lordship.

⁷On the role of natural revelation, see the section so titled later in this chapter.

⁸One recent book that attacks Van Til's presuppositionalism and advocates

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through church history, particularly the second-century Apologists (Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Aris- tides), the great thirteenth-century thinker Thomas Aquinas and his many followers down to the present day, Joseph But- ler (d. 1752) and his followers, and indeed the great majority of apologists in our own time.⁹

In saying that traditional apologists espouse “neutrality,” I am not arguing that they seek to put their Christian com-

the traditional approach is *Classical Apologetics*, by R. C. Sproul, John Gerst- ner, and Arthur Lindsley (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). On the other side would be my *DKG* or any book of Van Til’s, such as *The Defense of the Faith*. See my review of the Sproul-Gerstner-Lindsley volume in the *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, 2 (Fall 1985): 279–99. I’ve included it as appendix A at the end of this book.

⁹My friend R. C. Sproul, in correspondence, insists that the classical tradi- tion, notably Aquinas and Sproul(!), does not claim “neutrality,” but rather appeals to God’s general revelation—his revelation in nature, history, and conscience. (See the discussion of Romans 1 later in this chapter and the discussion of natural revelation.) However, in this connection Aquinas distinguished not between natural and special revelation but rather between reason and faith—that is, between reasoning unaided by revelation and reasoning aided by it. Further, he (unlike Sproul, interestingly) had very little practical awareness of the effects of sin upon human reasoning, so that he was able to use the views and arguments of the pagan philosopher Aristotle uncritically, with a few notable exceptions. Unlike Calvin, Aquinas did not believe that one needs the “spectacles of Scripture” to rightly interpret God’s revelation in nature. In my view, Aquinas saw Aristotle’s reasoning as nei- ther pro- nor anti-Christian, but neutral. As for Sproul himself, I have noth- ing critical to say about his exposition of the effects of sin on unbelieving reasoning in Rom. 1. He clearly denies the neutrality of unbelieving thought (see *Classical Apologetics*, 39–63). Thus, he recognizes that the apologetic en- counter between believer and unbeliever is not between two parties who are seeking to think neutrally, but between an unbeliever who is biased against the truth and a believer who is seeking to correct that bias and is therefore, inevitably, biased in the opposite direction. But I don’t find this discussion consistent with the treatment of autonomy on pp. 231–40. To encourage the unbeliever to think autonomously is to encourage him to think without the correction of revelation—that is, to think “neutrally” (which is actually to think disobediently, replacing God’s standards with the unbeliever’s own). (For more detail on this point, see my review of *Classical Apologetics*, noted earlier.) My guess is that the three authors of this book were not entirely agreed among themselves. Making comparisons with books and articles these gentlemen have written independently, I would guess that the treatment of Romans 1 is the work of Sproul and pp. 231–40 is the work of Gerstner. I

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mitment aside in doing apologetics. Indeed, many of them believe that their type of apologetic is warranted by Scripture and is thus very much a “setting apart of Christ as Lord.” They do, however, tell the unbeliever to think neutrally during the apologetic encounter, and they do seek to develop a neutral argument, one that has no distinctively biblical presuppositions.

I am far from wishing to declare this tradition worthless. But on the precise point at issue, the question of neutrality, I do believe that its position is unbiblical. Peter’s reasoning, in our theme verse, is very different. For Peter, apologetics is certainly not an exception to our overall commitment to Jesus’ lordship. On the contrary, the apologetic situation is one in which we are especially to “set apart Christ as Lord,” to speak and live in a way that exalts his lordship and encourages others to do so as well. In the larger context, Peter is telling his readers to do what is right, despite the opposition of unbelievers (vv. 13–14). He tells us not to fear them. Surely it was not his view that in apologetics we should set forth something less than the truth, out of fear that the truth itself might be rejected.

Peter tells us, on the contrary, that the lordship of Jesus (and hence the truth of his word, for how can we call him “Lord” and not do what he says [Luke 6:46]?) is our ultimate presupposition.¹⁰ An ultimate presupposition is a basic heart-commitment, an ultimate trust. We trust Jesus Christ as a matter of eternal life or death. We trust his wisdom beyond all other wisdom. We trust his promises above all others. He calls

am happy to welcome R. C. Sproul as an honorary presuppositionalist, but I do hope he will keep talking to his colleagues about this matter.

¹⁰See *DKG*, 1–49, esp. p. 45. “Lord” in Scripture refers to the head of a covenant relationship. In that relationship, the Lord dictates to his covenant servants the way they are to live and promises them blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. He also tells them of the blessings that he has already given to them—his “unmerited favor,” or grace, which is to motivate their obedience. Without words of grace, law, and promise, there is no lordship. To recognize the Lord is to believe and obey his words above the words of anyone else. And to obey the Lord’s words in that way is to accept them as one’s ultimate presupposition.

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us to give him all our loyalty and not allow any other loyalty to compete with him (Deut. 6:4ff.; Matt. 6:24; 12:30; John 14:6; Acts 4:12). We obey his law, even when it conflicts with lesser laws (Acts 5:29). Since we believe him more certainly than we believe anything else, he (and hence his Word) is the very *criterion*, the ultimate *standard* of truth. What higher standard could there possibly be? What standard is more authoritative? What standard is more clearly known to us (see Rom. 1:19–21)? What authority ultimately validates all other authorities?

The lordship of Christ is not only ultimate and unquestionable, not only above and beyond all other authorities, but also over all areas of human life. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 we read, “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (cf. Rom. 14:23; 2 Cor. 10:5; Col. 3:17, 23; 2 Tim. 3:16–17). Our Lord’s demand upon us is comprehensive. In all that we do, we must seek to please him. No area of human life is neutral.¹¹

Surely this principle includes the area of thinking and knowing. The fear of the Lord is the very beginning of knowledge, says the author of Proverbs (1:7; cf. Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10). Those who are not brought to fear God by the new birth cannot even see the kingdom of God (John 3:3).

The point is not that unbelievers are simply ignorant of the truth. Rather, God has revealed himself to each person with unmistakable clarity, both in creation (Ps. 19; Rom.

¹¹This was the insight of the great Dutch thinker Abraham Kuyper. He saw that the lordship of Christ requires radically different Christian forms of culture. Christians should be producing distinctively Christian art, science, philosophy, psychology, historical and biblical scholarship, and political and economic systems. And Christians should educate their children in distinctively Christian ways (note the God-saturated education urged in Deut. 6:6ff. after the challenge to love God exclusively). For many of us, such considerations mandate home schooling or Christian schools for our children, for how can we otherwise compete with up to seven hours a day of public-school secularism mandated by law? In any case, Christians may not take the easy road, uncritically following the thinking of the unbelieving world. Consider Kuyper’s famous remark: Of all the territory in the creation, Jesus says, “It is mine.”

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1:18–21) and in man’s own nature (Gen. 1:26ff.). In one sense, the unbeliever knows God (Rom. 1:21). At some level of his consciousness or unconsciousness, that knowledge remains.¹² But in spite of that knowledge, the unbeliever intentionally distorts the truth, exchanging it for a lie (Rom. 1:18–32; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16 [note especially 2:14]; 2 Cor. 4:4). Thus, the non-Christian is “deceived” (Titus 3:3). He knows God (Rom. 1:21) and does not know him at the same time (1 Cor. 1:21; 2:14).¹³ Plainly, these facts underscore the point that God’s revelation must govern our apologetic approach. The unbeliever cannot (because he will not) come to faith apart from the biblical gospel of salvation. We would not know about the unbeliever’s condition apart from Scripture. And we cannot address it apologetically unless we are ready to listen to Scripture’s own principles of apologetics.

¹²Some have tried to stress the past (aorist) form of “know” in Rom. 1:21 to prove that the knowledge in view is past, not continuing into the present. Paul’s purpose in this passage, however, is part of his larger purpose in 1:1–3:21, which is to show that all have sinned and therefore that none can be justified through the works of the law (3:19–21). In chap. 1 he shows us that even without access to the written law, Gentiles are guilty of sin before God (chap. 2 deals with the Jews). How can they be held responsible without access to the written law? Because of the knowledge of God that they have gained from creation. If that knowledge were relegated to the past, we would have to conclude that the Gentiles in the present are not responsible for their actions, contrary to 3:9. The past form is used (participially) because the past tense is dominant in the context. That is appropriate, because Paul intends to embark on a “history of suppressing the truth” in vv. 21–32. But he clearly does not regard the events of vv. 21–32 merely as past history. He clearly is using this history to describe the present condition of Gentiles before God. Therefore, the aorist *gnomtes* should not be pressed to indicate past time exclusively. As the suppression continues, so does the knowledge that renders the suppression culpable.

¹³Obviously, there is some complexity here that requires further explanation. There are different kinds of knowledge in view, for the Christian’s knowledge of God (which the unbeliever lacks) is very different from the unbeliever’s own knowledge of God (Rom. 1:21, 32). Further, there is psychological complexity: the unbeliever knows things at one level of his consciousness that he seeks to banish from other levels. To put it as simply as I can, he knows God, he knows what God requires, but he does not want that knowledge to influence his decisions, except negatively: knowledge of God’s will tells him how to disobey God. See *DKG*, 1–61.

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But this means not only that the *apologist* must “set apart Jesus as Lord,” but also that his *argument* must presuppose that lordship. Our argument must be an exhibit of that knowledge, that wisdom, which is based on the “fear of the Lord,” not an exhibition of unbelieving foolishness. Therefore, apologetic argument is no more neutral than any other human activity. In apologetic argument, as in everything else we do, we must presuppose the truth of God’s Word. We either accept God’s authority or we do not, and not to do so is sin. It doesn’t matter that we sometimes find ourselves conversing with non-Christians. Then too—perhaps especially then (for then we are bearing witness)—we must be faithful to our Lord’s revelation.

To tell the unbeliever that we can reason with him on a neutral basis, however that claim might help to attract his attention, is a lie. Indeed, it is a lie of the most serious kind, for it falsifies the very heart of the gospel—that Jesus Christ is *Lord*. For one thing, there is no neutrality. Our witness is either God’s wisdom or the world’s foolishness. There is nothing in between. For another thing, even if neutrality were possible, that route would be forbidden to us.

Circular Argument?

Does this mean that we are called to embrace circular argument? Only in one sense. We are not called to use arguments like “The Bible is true; therefore, the Bible is true.” It is quite legitimate, as we shall see, to argue on the basis of evidence, such as the testimony of five hundred witnesses to the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6). Eyewitness accounts may be used argumentatively as follows: “If Jesus’ post-Resurrection appearances are well attested, then the Resurrection is a fact. His post-Resurrection appearances are well attested; therefore, the Resurrection is a fact.” This is not a circular argument on any reasonable definition of circularity. And yet a certain circularity becomes evident when someone asks, “What are your ultimate criteria for good attestation?” or “What broad view of human

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knowledge permits you to reason from eyewitness testimony to a miraculous fact?” The empiricist philosophy of David Hume, to use only one example, does not allow for that kind of argument. The fact is that the Christian here is presupposing a Christian epistemology—a view of knowledge, testimony, witness, appearance, and fact that is subject to Scripture. In other words, he is using scriptural standards to prove scriptural conclusions.¹⁴

Does that procedure deserve to be condemned as “circular”? Everyone else reasons the same way. Every philosophy must use its own standards in proving its conclusions; otherwise, it is simply inconsistent. Those who believe that human reason is the ultimate authority (rationalists) must presuppose the authority of reason in their arguments for rationalism. Those who believe in the ultimacy of sense experience must presuppose it in arguing for their philosophy (empiricism). And skeptics must be skeptical of their own skepticism (a fact that is, of course, the Achilles’ heel of skepticism). The point is that when one is arguing for an ultimate criterion, whether Scripture, the Koran, human reason, sensation, or whatever, one must use criteria compatible with that conclusion. If that is circularity, then everybody is guilty of circularity.¹⁵

Does this fact eliminate the possibility of communication between believer and unbeliever? It might seem so. The Christian argues on biblical criteria that the Resurrection is a fact. The non-Christian replies that he cannot accept those criteria and that he will not accept the Resurrection unless we prove it by, say, the standards of Hume’s empiricism. We re-

¹⁴This epistemology is uniquely biblical in the sense that an unbeliever cannot consistently accept it. Indeed, the revelation of God in creation and in Scripture is central to it. Any theory of knowledge must specify the ultimate standard or criterion for determining truth and falsity. The Christian’s ultimate standard is God’s word in Scripture; the unbeliever’s ultimate standard must be located elsewhere. See *DKG*, in which this epistemology is worked out in some detail.

¹⁵Granted these clarifications, I don’t care very much whether the Christian apologist accepts or rejects the term *circular* to describe his argument. There are obvious dangers of misunderstanding in using it, dangers that I sought to brave in *DKG*. But I am more inclined now to say to my critics, “Granted your definition of circularity, I don’t believe in it.”

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ply that we cannot accept Hume's presuppositions. The unbeliever says he cannot accept ours. Does that end the conversation?

Certainly not, for several reasons.

In the first place, as I have said, Scripture tells us that God has revealed himself clearly to the unbeliever, even to such an extent that the unbeliever knows God (Rom. 1:21). Although he represses that knowledge (vv. 21ff.), there is at some level of his consciousness a memory of that revelation. It is against this memory that he sins, and it is because of that memory that he is held responsible for those sins. At that level, he knows that empiricism is wrong and that Scripture's standards are right. We direct our apologetic witness not to his empiricist epistemology or whatever, but to his memory of God's revelation and to the epistemology implicit in that revelation. To do that, to accomplish such meaningful communication, we not only may but must use Christian criteria, rather than those of unbelieving epistemology. So when the unbeliever says "I can't accept your presuppositions," we reply: "Well, let's talk some more, and maybe they will become more attractive to you (just as you hope yours will become more attractive to me) as we expound our ideas in greater depth. In the meantime, let's just keep using our respective presuppositions and move along to some matters we haven't discussed."

In the second place, our witness to the unbeliever never comes alone. If God chooses to use our witness for his purposes, then he always adds a supernatural element to that witness—the Holy Spirit, working in and with the word (Rom. 15:18–19; 1 Cor. 2:4–5, 12ff.; 2 Cor. 3:15–18; 1 Thess. 1:5 [cf. 2:13]; 2 Thess. 2:13–14). If we have doubts about our own ability to communicate, for whatever reason, we need not doubt the ability of the Holy Spirit. And if our witness is fundamentally his tool, then our strategy must be dictated by his Word, not by our supposedly common-sense suppositions.

In the third place, this is in fact what we do in similar cases that are not normally considered religious. Imagine

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someone living in a dreamworld—perhaps a paranoid, who believes that everyone is out to kill him. We'll call him Oscar. Let's say that Oscar presupposes this horror, so that every bit of evidence to the contrary is twisted and made to fit the conclusion. Every kind deed, for example, becomes in Oscar's view evidence of a nefarious plot to catch him off guard and plunge a knife into his ribs. Oscar is doing what unbelievers do, according to Romans 1:21ff.—exchanging the truth for a lie. How can we help him? What shall we say to him? What presuppositions, what criteria, what standards would we employ? Certainly not his, for to do that would lead us to embrace his paranoia. Certainly not “neutral” criteria, for there are none. One must either accept his presupposition or reject it. Of course, the answer is that we reason with him according to the truth as we perceive it, even though that truth conflicts with his deepest presuppositions. On some occasions, he might answer, “Well, we seem to be reasoning on different assumptions, so we really cannot get anywhere.” But on other occasions, our true reasoning might penetrate his defenses. For Oscar is, after all, a human being. At some level, we assume, he knows that everyone is not out to kill him. At some level, he is capable of hearing and being changed. Paranoids do sometimes, after all, revert to sanity. We speak the truth to him in the hope that that will happen, and in the knowledge that if words are to help at all in this situation, they must convey the truth, not further error, to bring healing.

I take it, then, that a “presuppositional”¹⁶ approach to apologetics is warranted not only in Scripture, but also in common sense!

¹⁶I do not particularly like the term *presuppositional* as a description of Van Til's apologetics or my own, although it is often used in this way. Presuppositions are often contrasted with evidences, so that to call a system presuppositional tends to convey the message that that system recognizes the importance of presuppositions but despises evidences. Gordon Clark used the term of himself, and rightly so, because he had a very skeptical view of what could be known through human sense experience, and thus a skeptical view of what is usually called “evidence.” He believed that the term *knowledge* should be reserved only for what we learn from Scripture. Van

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In the fourth place, Christian apologetics can take many forms. If the unbeliever objects to the “circularity” of the Christian’s evidential arguments, the Christian can simply change to another kind of argument, such as an “offensive” apologetic against the unbeliever’s own worldview or epistemology. That apologetic will also be circular in the precise sense noted above, but less obviously so. It could be presented Socratically, as a series of questions: How do *you* account for the universality of logical laws?, How do *you* arrive at the judgment that human life is worth living?, etc. Or, perhaps, as the prophet Nathan did with King David, when David would not otherwise repent of his sin (2 Sam. 11, 12), we can tell the unbeliever a parable. Maybe we can tell the one about the rich fool (Luke 12:6–21). Those who believe that presuppositionalism eliminates communication between believer and unbeliever underestimate God’s power to reach the unbelieving heart. They also underestimate the variety and richness of a biblical apologetic, the creativity that God has given to us as his spokesmen, and the many forms that biblical apologetic can take.

Til, however, did not have such a skeptical view of sense experience, did not believe that knowledge was restricted to the Bible in that way, and was not inclined to reject the use of evidence. Thus, the term *presuppositional*, used in that sense, is not an adequate description of Van Til’s position or mine. Others, such as (I believe) John Gerstner, misunderstand Van Til’s use of the term. They stress the *pre* in *presupposition* and thus take it that a presupposition is something that one believes *before* (temporally) one believes anything else. This is wrong. The *pre* should be understood mainly as an indicator of eminence (e.g., *preeminence*), not temporal priority. (However, there is a sense in which the Christian presupposition—i.e., the knowledge of the truth that even unbelievers have while dishonoring it—is temporally prior: it is present from the beginning of life.) Still others equate *presupposition* with *hypothesis* or assume it to be an arbitrary, groundless supposition. (On Van Til’s view, presuppositions are grounded in divine revelation and are categorical, not hypothetical.) With such confusions abroad, I am reluctant to use the term at all! Still, I don’t want to quibble over words, and the term has become a standard label for all of those who understand that there is no religious neutrality in thought and knowledge. So I will occasionally use that label of myself and Van Til, by way of accommodation, and also to emphasize what we share with Clark and others: the rejection of neutrality.

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In the fifth place, I have, in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* and elsewhere, distinguished between “narrowly circular” and “broadly circular” arguments. An example of the former would be, “The Bible is the Word of God because it is the Word of God.” That may itself be a way of saying “The Bible is the Word of God because it says it is.” There is a profound truth vividly displayed in this narrow argument, namely, that there is no authority higher than Scripture by which Scripture may be judged, and that in the final analysis we must believe Scripture on its own say-so. Nevertheless, the narrow argument has some obvious disadvantages. In particular, an unbeliever will likely dismiss it out of hand, unless a great deal of explanation is given. We may overcome those disadvantages to some extent by moving to a broader circular argument. That broader argument says, “The Bible is the Word of God because of various evidences,” and then it specifies those evidences. Now the argument is still circular in a sense, because the apologist chooses, evaluates, and formulates these evidences in ways controlled by Scripture. But this argument tends to hold the unbeliever’s attention longer and to be more persuasive. “Circularity,” in the sense that I have conceded it, can be as broad as the whole universe; for every fact witnesses to the truth of God.

God’s Responsibility and Ours

The relation of divine sovereignty to human responsibility is one of the great mysteries of the Christian faith. It is plain from Scripture in any case that both are real and that both are important. Calvinistic theology is known for its emphasis on divine sovereignty—for its view that God “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11). But in Calvinism there is at least an equal emphasis upon human responsibility.

An equal emphasis? Many would not be willing to say that about Calvinism. But consider the Calvinistic emphasis on the authority of God’s law—a more positive view of the

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law than in any other tradition of evangelical theology. To the Calvinist, human beings have duties before God. Adam failed to fulfill his duty and plunged the human race into sin and misery. But Jesus fulfilled his duty and brought eternal salvation to his people. Although God is sovereign, human obedience is of the utmost importance. God will fill and subdue the earth, but only through human effort (Gen. 1:28–30). He will gather his elect from all nations into his church, but only through faithful human preaching (Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 1:8; Rom. 10:13–15). Salvation comes to people solely by God’s sovereign grace, without any human effort; yet we are to receive that salvation by grace and “work [it] out” with “fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12)—not in spite of, but because of, the fact that “it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (v. 13). You see that typically—God’s sovereignty does not exclude, but engages, human responsibility.¹⁷ Indeed, it is God’s sovereignty that grants human responsibility, that gives freedom and significance to human choices and actions, that ordains an important human role within God’s plan for history.

It is important for us to maintain this balance between divine sovereignty and human obedience in apologetics. We have already seen that apologetics cannot be successful apart from a supernatural element, namely, the testimony of the Holy Spirit. In that sense, apologetics is a sovereign work of

¹⁷These points have many important applications apart from apologetics, such as: (1) Christians often object that some kinds of scientific or technological progress amount to “playing God.” Thus, they develop generalized objections to birth control, genetic research, ecology, space exploration, or whatever—even to medical care in general. At some points, to be sure, God has set limits (e.g., to fetal-tissue experimentation), but the lordship of God in these areas does not preclude a responsible human role—quite the contrary. (2) Some Christians insist that since God sovereignly builds his church, we ought not to make human plans and study human techniques of church growth. Granted that some growth schemes are not pleasing to God, the fact remains that there is room for human responsibility here too. Denying this is like saying “God converts and sanctifies people, so preaching is unnecessary, or at least we can ignore the techniques of effective preaching.”

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God. It is he who persuades the unbelieving mind and heart. But there is also a place for the human apologist. He has the same place as the preacher mentioned in Romans 10:14. Indeed, he *is* the preacher.

Apologetics and preaching are not two different things. Both are attempts to reach unbelievers for Christ. Preaching is apologetic because it aims at persuasion. Apologetics is preaching because it presents the gospel, aiming at conversion and sanctification. However, the two activities do have different perspectives or emphases. Apologetics emphasizes the aspect of rational persuasion, while preaching emphasizes the seeking of godly change in people's lives. But if rational persuasion is a persuasion of the heart, then it is the same thing as godly change. God is the persuader-converter, but he works through our testimony. Other terms are also roughly synonymous (or perspectively related): witnessing, teaching, evangelizing, arguing,¹⁸ etc.

Another way of putting it is this: the Spirit is the one who converts, but he normally works through the word. Faith wrought by the Spirit is trust in a message, a promise of God.¹⁹ As the earth was made by Spirit and word together

¹⁸I will occasionally use the term *argument* in this book, although it is sometimes misunderstood. By it I do not mean a hostile encounter, as the term is sometimes used in ordinary language. Nor do I mean an arid, purposeless discussion of abstract or theoretical issues—the concept that some people connect with the word. Rather, I use it in the logical sense: an argument is simply a group of premises which, the arguer claims, imply a conclusion. So understood, the term is roughly synonymous with *reasoning*, which, e.g., Paul did, according to Acts 17:2; 18:4, 19; 24:25. People sometimes advise Christian witnesses not to argue. That advice may be good if we take *argument* in the sense of a hostile confrontation (but see the section on “Dangers,” later in this chapter). It may also be good if *argument* refers to a mere debate over abstract issues unrelated to sin and salvation. But in the logical sense, argument is quite unavoidable. Every sermon, every Bible study, and every witness to Christ seeks to warrant a conclusion (faith, repentance, obedience) and thus has an argumentative aspect.

¹⁹We are, of course, speaking of faith as exercised by adult human beings of normal intelligence. The Spirit also works in the hearts of infants (2 Sam. 12:23; Luke 1:41–44; 18:16; Acts 2:39)—and presumably also in the hearts of people who are without the gifts of speech or even thought. That is very mysterious. Some theologians would describe the Spirit's work in such cases

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(Gen. 1:2–3; Ps. 33:6 [“breath” = Spirit]), so God re-creates sinful human beings by his word and Spirit (John 3:3ff.; Rom. 1:16ff.; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). As we have seen, the Spirit’s work is necessary, but he works by illumining and persuading us to believe God’s words (1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thess. 1:5). Thus, as I indicated above, the Spirit is necessary, but the preacher-apologist is also necessary. The work of the preacher-apologist is to present the word. And his job is not just to read the word, but to preach it—that is, to expound it, to apply it to his hearers, to display its beauty, its truth, its rationality. The preacher-apologist seeks to combat the unbeliever’s false impressions and present to him the word as it really is. It is to this testimony that the Spirit also bears witness.

This discussion will suffice to answer those who oppose the work of apologetics out of fear that it is an attempt to “play God.” There need not be any such competition between God’s work and ours, as long as we recognize both God’s ultimate sovereignty and his determination to use human agents to accomplish his purpose. Apologetics, rightly understood, is not playing God; it is merely practicing a divinely ordained human vocation.

Our discussion of divine sovereignty and human responsibility will also help us to answer those who insist that the Bible needs no defense. Charles Spurgeon is sometimes quoted (from somewhere!) as saying, “Defend the Bible? I would as soon defend a lion.” Well, it is certainly true that Scripture, attended by the Spirit, is powerful (Rom. 1:16; Heb. 4:12–13). And it does defend itself, giving reasons for what it says. Think of all the “therefores” in Scripture, such as in Romans 8:1 and 12:1. Scripture does not merely tell us to believe and do certain things; it tells us to do them for certain reasons. This is Scripture defending itself, indicating its own rationale. But, of course, when we as human preachers expound Scripture, we too must expound that rationale. Thus,

as regeneration without faith; others would describe it as a regeneration producing faith in “seed form,” that is, a disposition to hear and obey a word of God which as yet the person is unable to understand.

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we defend Scripture by using Scripture's own defenses. Indeed, Scripture not only defends itself but goes on the attack against sin and unbelief! Still, remarkably enough, Scripture itself calls us to be its defenders (Phil. 1:7, 16, 27; 2 Tim. 4:2; 1 Peter 3:15). To defend the Bible is ultimately simply to present it as it is—to present its truth, beauty, and goodness, its application to present-day hearers, and, of course, its rationale. When that message is preached so that people understand, the Bible defends itself. But the Bible will not defend itself to those who have never heard its message. Spreading that message is a human task, the task of human defenders. Listen to the apostle Paul: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tim. 4:2).

Sola Scriptura

"The Bible needs no defense" can also be used somewhat differently: as a way of invoking the Protestant principle *sola Scriptura*, the sufficiency of Scripture. Some fear that apologetics (which over the years has been notorious for injecting nonbiblical philosophical notions into Christian theology) may be seeking to subject Scripture to the judgment of something beyond Scripture. That is, of course, a great danger for the "traditional" apologetic, and it may happen unintentionally even when an apologist seeks to be "presuppositional." But when apologetics is consistently presuppositional—i.e., when it frankly recognizes that its own methods are subject to biblical norms—then it will avoid this danger.

Sola Scriptura, after all, does not require the exclusion of all extrabiblical data, even from theology. It simply requires that in theology and in all other disciplines, the highest authority, the supreme standard, be Scripture and Scripture alone. As the Westminster Confession (1.6) puts it, it is as "the whole counsel of God" that Scripture may not be added to. There can be no objection to mentioning extrabiblical data

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in apologetics, as long as those data are not presented as “counsel of God” on the same level as Scripture. Human thought, even theology, requires the use of extrabiblical data, for we are always dealing with the contemporary world in which God has placed us. Obviously, physics, sociology, geology, psychology, medicine, and so forth must respond to data beyond the Scriptures. Theology must do the same, because it is not a mere *reading* of Scripture, but an *application* of Scripture to human need.²⁰ Theology, therefore, always faces the danger of elevating the theologian’s own conception of human need to a position of equal authority to, or even greater authority than, the Scriptures. But through prayer and meditation on God’s Word, that danger can be avoided.

Therefore, to defend the Bible according to its own standards, even when we use extrabiblical data in the process, is not to add anything to Scripture as our supreme standard. It is simply to expose, as we saw above, the rationality of Scripture itself.

It is sometimes hard to rid ourselves of the notion that when we argue the truth of Scripture based on facts outside of Scripture, we are elevating those facts (ultimately our own fact gathering) to a position of greater authority than Scripture. It seems that we are measuring Scripture by those facts—that we are judging Scripture on the basis of their (presumably higher) authority. Van Til himself seemed to fear this, though not consistently.²¹ But this is not necessarily the case.

²⁰See *DKG*, 76–88, 93–98.

²¹For example, in *Defense of the Faith*, 252, he criticizes arguments that “started from human experience with causation and purpose and by analogy argued to the idea of a cause of and a purpose with the world as a whole.” He objects that “if you start with the ideas of cause and purpose as intelligible to man without God when these concepts apply to relations within the universe, then you cannot consistently say that you need God for the idea of cause or purpose when these concepts apply to the universe as a whole.” True enough. But arguments about cause and purpose do not necessarily assume that “cause and purpose are intelligible to man without God,” even as they “apply to relations within the universe.” In fact, an apologist may very well advance such an argument because of his conviction that cause and purpose are not at all intelligible without God. Indeed, if

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When I say, “There is design in the world; therefore, God exists,” I may in fact be getting the premise from Scripture itself! (Surely Scripture teaches that there is design in the world!) In addressing the unbeliever, I may be addressing the knowledge that, according to Romans 1:18ff., he has obtained from creation. Indeed, when I say that, I may very well be expressing the certainty of my heart that design is unintelligible apart from the biblical God, and therefore that the very existence of design implies his reality. It is not that my concept of design is something by which I judge the Bible; rather, the Bible tells me what must be true if design is to exist.

What about using extrabiblical historical or scientific data to confirm biblical teachings? Surely, some might say, to do that implies that we have more confidence in this data than we do in the Bible, that we consider this data to have more credibility. And again, my reply is negative. I have far more confidence in the truth of the biblical history than I have in the reliability of, e.g., Josephus.²² But he does occasionally confirm biblical statements, and I think it is perfectly legitimate to mention that fact in apologetic discussions. The point is not that Josephus is more authoritative than, say, Luke. It is rather that even the non-Christian Josephus at points recognized the facts that Scripture records. And modern skeptics, who are often willing to believe even the least reliable non-Christian historians in preference to God’s Word, must take note that even first-century non-Christian historians

Thomas Aquinas’s causal argument is sound, it makes, in effect, that precise claim. His causal argument implies that if God doesn’t exist, there is no *complete* causal explanation for anything, and therefore there is nothing that can rightly be called “cause.” (Thomas himself may or may not have thought along those lines; I am deducing what is implicit in his argument. But whether he did or not is a question of his personal piety, not a question about the value of his argument.) Thomas is usually considered (by Van Til and others) to represent the antithesis of Van Til’s presuppositional method, but in this case the antithesis is not obvious. I intend to explore more examples of this sort in my forthcoming book on Van Til.

²²Josephus is a well-known Jewish historian who lived approximately from A.D. 37 to A.D. 100 and thus was a younger contemporary of the apostles.

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wrote as one would expect them to, granted the truth of Scripture.

Again, this sort of argument does not add anything to Scripture in a way that would compromise the *sola Scriptura* principle. It adds nothing to our stock of supremely authoritative truth. That is in the Bible and nowhere else. Further, in one sense, arguments like the causal argument or the Josephus argument, even though they involve extrabiblical data, aim simply at communicating the Scripture “as it really is.” After all, to see Scripture rightly, it helps to see it in its various *contexts*: the context of its contemporary culture (with writers like Josephus), the context of the overall universe (including cause and purpose). To see Scripture rightly is to see how it fits and illumines those contexts. In that sense a proper causal or historical argument does not go beyond Scripture. It simply shows the applicability of scriptural truth to some area of the world, and thus it displays the Bible in its full meaning.²³

I conclude that we may use extrabiblical data in apologetics, but not as independent criteria to which Scripture must measure up. How ridiculous it would be to imagine that God’s Word must be considered false if it fails to agree with Josephus or Eusebius or Papias—or with some anthropologist’s theories about “early man”! Precisely the opposite is the case. We should simply present Scripture as it is, that is, as sometimes agreeing with other writings and sometimes not. That is what we would expect if God’s word were to enter a world of finitude and sin. And that very fact can, by God’s grace, be persuasive. Our job is to present the Bible as it is, and to do so we must often refer to it in various contexts.

²³Note that *DKG*, 76–100, equates “meaning” with “application.” Scripture is written for people who live in the world. It is written for people with eyes and ears, people who will read it in the context of the rest of their lives. It expects us to apply its teaching to what is happening around us. Indeed, it says, to properly understand Scripture *is* to apply it to these situations (Matt. 16:3; 22:29; Luke 24:25; John 5:39–40; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21; John 20:31).

***Sola Scriptura* and Natural Revelation**

To relate Scripture to its contexts is to relate it to natural revelation. Natural revelation is the revelation of God in everything he has made (Pss. 19:1ff.; 104:1ff.; Rom. 1:18ff.), including human beings, who are his image (Gen. 1:27; 9:6; James 3:9). Every human being is surrounded by God's revelation, even within himself. This includes, of course, the unbeliever. As I stated earlier, the unbeliever knows God clearly (Rom. 1:21) but seeks to repress that knowledge in various ways.

Natural revelation reveals the eternal power and nature of God (Rom. 1:20). It also reveals his moral standards (Rom. 1:32) and his wrath against sin (same verse; cf. v. 18). However, it does not reveal God's plan of salvation, which comes specifically through the preaching of Christ (Rom. 10:17; cf. vv. 13–15). We have that preaching of Christ in definitive form in the Scriptures, and on the authority of Scripture we continue to preach the gospel to the world.

Why do we need two forms of revelation? For one thing, direct divine speech shortens the “learning curve.” Even un-fallen Adam needed to hear God's direct speech that supplemented and interpreted God's revelation in nature. He didn't need to figure everything out for himself; in many cases that may have taken a long time or indeed been impossible for the finite mind. So, as God's faithful covenant servant, Adam accepted this help gratefully. He accepted God's interpretation of the world until he made the tragic decision to accept Satan's interpretation instead.

But after the Fall, at least two other reasons for special divine speech entered the picture. One was man's need of a saving promise, a promise that could never be deduced from natural revelation alone. The other reason was to correct our sinful misinterpretations of natural revelation. Romans 1:21–32 shows what people do with natural revelation when left with no other word of God. They repress it, disobey it, exchange it for a lie, disvalue it, and honor those who rebel against it.

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Thus, God has given us Scripture, or “special revelation,”²⁴ both to supplement natural revelation (by adding to it the message of salvation) and to correct our misuses of natural revelation. As Calvin said, the Christian should look at nature with the “spectacles of Scripture.” If even unfallen Adam needed to interpret the world according to God’s verbal utterance, how much more do we!

The point is not that Scripture is more divine or more authoritative than natural revelation. Natural revelation is every bit the word of God and absolutely authoritative. The difference is that Scripture is a verbal divine utterance that God gives us to supplement and correct our view of his world. We must humbly accept that assistance. In doing so, we do not make Scripture more authoritative than natural revelation; rather, we allow the Word (with its ever-present Spirit) to correct our *interpretations* of natural revelation.²⁵

To allow Scripture this corrective work, we must accept the principle that our settled belief²⁶ as to Scripture’s teaching must take precedence over what we would believe from natural revelation alone.²⁷ God gave Scripture as the covenant

²⁴“Special revelation” in Reformed theology includes special utterances of God’s voice (as in Ex. 19–20); the words of Jesus, prophets, and apostles; and the written word that records and preserves the oral forms of God’s speech. My own view is that the distinction between general and special revelation is not adequate to characterize all the forms of revelation described in Scripture and that additional categories are needed. I hope to develop that scheme in a later book, *Doctrine of the Word of God*. But the traditional twofold distinction will have to do for now.

²⁵Granted, our interpretations of Scripture also need to be corrected at times. But the proper order is: Scripture itself corrects our interpretations both of Scripture and of nature. Can natural revelation (e.g., knowledge of ancient languages) sometimes correct our understanding of Scripture? Yes, but only insofar as such correction appears on reflection to be justified by the scriptural text itself. So Scripture has a primacy over all else. See *DKG*, part 2, “The Justification of Knowledge.”

²⁶The adjective “settled” is important; I am of course not advocating dogmatic adherence to ideas based on half-baked exegesis and rejection of, say, scientific theories on the basis of such sloppy theologizing.

²⁷This is not, of course, to say that our settled beliefs concerning the teaching of Scripture are infallible. See *DKG*, 134–36, on the subject of certainty. But I repeat: those settled beliefs must take precedence over our beliefs,

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constitution of the people of God, and if it is to serve us in that way, it must take precedence over all other sources of knowledge. It is wrong, for example, to suggest (as many do) that the “two books of nature and Scripture” should be read side by side, carrying equal weight in every respect. That sort of argument has been used to justify relatively uncritical Christian acceptance of evolution, secular psychology, and so on. In such arguments, Scripture is not permitted to do its corrective work, to protect God’s people from the wisdom of the world (see 1 Cor. 2:6–16). Hence, *sola Scriptura*.

Nevertheless, natural revelation, rightly understood through the “spectacles of Scripture,” is of tremendous value to the Christian and, specifically, to the apologist. As we look at nature with God’s help, we see that the heavens really do “declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). We see some of the very interesting ways in which human beings image God.²⁸ We see how it is that God furnishes the rational structure of the world and of the human mind, so that the two structures are adapted to one another. We see through science the astonishing wisdom of God’s plan (see Ps. 104). We see through history and the arts what evils result when people abandon God and what blessings (and persecutions, Mark 10:30!) follow those who are faithful to him.

Traditional apologists have not always understood nature to be revelation of God. Aquinas did not distinguish between natural and special revelation, but between reasoning with and reasoning without the assistance of revelation. It is easy to understand how such views can be characterized as “autonomous” or “neutralist.” Other traditionalists, however, have made much of the concept of natural revelation, even describing their method as one that presents natural revelation (somehow apart from special) to the unbeliever.

settled or not, from other sources. Otherwise, we do not allow Scripture to be a true corrective to our understanding of natural revelation.

²⁸Meredith G. Kline’s *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) and James B. Jordan’s *Through New Eyes* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988) have some remarkable insights in this area.

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Certainly there can be no objection to presenting natural revelation to the unbeliever. We must, however, be careful that our statements about natural revelation are in line with scriptural teaching—that we are looking at nature through the “spectacles of Scripture.” Showing natural revelation to the unbeliever is not an invitation to him to reason neutrally or autonomously or to ignore the Scriptures. Therefore, in a sense, natural and special revelation must never be separated in an apologetic encounter.²⁹

The use of extrascriptural evidence, therefore, may be seen as part of a godly use of Scripture itself. It is an obedient response to Scripture’s own view of the world. In Scripture’s teaching, nature points to God; so, the obedient Christian apologist will show the unbeliever the various ways in which nature reveals God, without claiming neutrality and without allowing the use of non-Christian criteria of truth. Thus, while he appeals to natural revelation, he inevitably appeals to Scripture at the same time. Indeed, the very purpose of Scripture (as I emphasized in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*) is application, the use of Scripture to illumine situations and persons outside itself. “Viewing creation in the light of Scripture” and “applying Scripture to creation” are the same activity, seen from different perspectives.³⁰

²⁹Some have asked, “If nature and Scripture may never be understood apart from one another, then how can you say that the unbeliever, who sharply separates (even opposes) nature and Scripture, knows God?” But my claim is not that nature by itself gives no true knowledge. That claim would be contradicted by Rom. 1:19–20. Rather, my claim is that only an obedient response to the biblical message can provide the needed supplement and corrective to the unbeliever’s use of natural revelation, so that his knowledge of God (Rom. 1:21) becomes a knowledge in love (1 Cor. 8:1–3; 1 John 2:5; 4:8), a saving knowledge. Obviously, what the apologist seeks to communicate is not a knowledge (however correct) buried in the mind beneath layers of rationalization, darkness, foolishness, and lies (Rom. 1:18, 21–23), but a knowledge affirmed with confidence and delight, a knowledge that transforms the life, turning hatred into love.

³⁰In *DKG*, the former was called the situational perspective; and the latter, the normative perspective.

Granted this approach, there need be no competition be-

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tween presuppositions and evidences. Our scriptural presupposition authorizes the use of evidence, and the evidence is nothing more than the application of Scripture to our situation. The use of evidence is not contrary to *sola Scriptura*, but a fulfillment of that principle.

Values

What is the use, the purpose, the value of apologetics? Since apologetics and preaching are perspectively related, the benefits of the two are the same. As preaching leads to the conversion of the lost and the edification of the saints, so does apologetics.

The specific work of giving an intellectual rationale has its usefulness within these broader contexts. For the believer, apologetics gives reassurance to faith as it displays the rationality of Scripture itself. That rationality also gives to the believer an intellectual foundation, a basis for faith and a basis for making wise decisions in life. Apologetics is not itself that foundation, but it displays and describes the foundation presented in Scripture, as well as the way we should, according to Scripture, build upon that foundation.

For the unbeliever, God may use apologetic reasoning to sweep aside rationalizations, arguments by which the subject resists conversion. Apologetics may also provide evidence conducive to a change in conviction. We are not saying that the unbeliever lacks evidence. He is surrounded by evidence in creation (Ps. 19:1ff.; Rom. 1:18ff.) and in himself (Gen. 1:26ff.) for the existence of God, and there is plenty of evidence in Scripture for the truth of other Christian doctrines. But an apologist can formulate that evidence, and do so in provocative ways, drawing the unbeliever's attention to it. And he can apply it to the unbeliever's particular objections.

For those who never come to faith, apologetics may still be doing God's work. Like preaching, again, it adds to their condemnation. Failure to repent and believe, despite faithful presentations of the truth, leads to more severe condemnation

(Luke 12:47ff.).

Dangers

James warns us (3:1), “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” If we do not teach, our errors affect only ourselves; but if we do, our errors can affect others also. Thus, errors in those who teach are more serious and will be judged more severely. The apologist is, as we have indicated, a teacher; therefore, the scriptural warnings about teachers apply to apologists.

Can we be more specific? In our theme verses, 1 Peter 3:15–16, Peter urges apologists to keep “a clear conscience,” so that those who slander them will be “ashamed.” It is interesting that Peter does not urge apologists to be intelligent and knowledgeable (although such qualities are certainly helpful), but to lead consistently godly lives. He gives us a practical standard for a discipline we are inclined to regard as theoretical.³¹

The fact is that every apologetic presentation has important practical contexts. Our communication with unbelievers consists not only of what we say, but also of how we live before them. If our life contradicts our doctrine, then our apologetics is hypocritical and loses credibility. But if our life and doctrine are consistent, then those who try to make us look bad will themselves lose credibility. They will, in the end at least, be ashamed.

To be still more specific: apologists are subject to the same sins that everyone else is, but over the years, they have been especially prone to sins in two areas. In terms of Ephesians 4:15, which urges us to speak the truth in love, we may say that apologists have sometimes been guilty of speaking

³¹Compare the mostly practical criteria for the teaching office in 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9.

falsehoods and sometimes of speaking without love. The first

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is often condemned in the New Testament polemic against false teaching (2 Tim. 3; 2 Peter 2; etc.). It is remarkable how many heresies are traceable to apologetic motives. Someone will think, “If I am going to present Christianity more persuasively, I will have to show that it is compatible with the intellectual movements of my time. I must present Christianity as ‘intellectually respectable.’” Thus, various Christian doctrines are compromised, replaced by the doctrines of popular philosophy. The second-century Apologists (Justin, Aristides, Athenagoras) were for the most part deeply committed Christians, but they compromised the Christian doctrine of creation, accommodating it to the Gnostic philosophical notion of a continuum of being between God and the world. This led to an almost impersonal concept of God (the unknowable being at the top of the scale) and a subordinationist view of the Trinity (Son and Spirit subordinate to God the Father, so that they could interact with the world, as the Father could not). Similar motivations are evident in Clement of Alexandria and Origen, in Thomas Aquinas, and more recently in Schleiermacher’s *Speeches to the Learned Despisers of Christianity* and the many modern theologians from Bultmann to Tillich to Pannenberg who want to show “modern man” the intellectual value of Christianity. Very often the apologetic motive has led to doctrinal compromise. That doesn’t mean that the apologetic motive is wrong; as we have seen, that motive in itself is scriptural. But the historic pattern and Scripture’s explicit admonitions should lead us to be highly cautious. And don’t be an apologist unless your first loyalty is to God—not to intellectual respectability, not to truth in the abstract, not to the unbeliever as such, not to some philosophic tradition.

Contributing to such failures are other sins: misdirected love, underestimation of human sin (as if what the unbeliever needs is merely a better argument), ignorance of God’s revelation (especially of biblical presuppositionalism), and intellectual pride.

The opposite violation of Ephesians 4:15 is speaking

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without love.³² Unfortunately, many contentious or quarrelsome people are attracted to the discipline of apologetics. In their hearts, they are unhappy unless they are in the midst of controversy; and if there is no controversy going on, they will create one, picking fights over matters that could easily be overlooked or resolved peacefully. Scripture speaks often of this spirit and always negatively: Proverbs 13:10; 18:6; 19:13; 26:21; Habakkuk 1:3; Romans 2:8; 1 Corinthians 1:11; 11:16; Philippians 1:16; Titus 3:9. One would do well to meditate on these passages before beginning a career in apologetics!

This sort of contentiousness comes from pride, according to Proverbs 13:10. When one is too proud to “take advice” from others, he insists on his own way until he is forced to desist. Far from being wise, such people are foolish (Prov. 18:6) and under the direction of the Devil himself (James 3:13–16). James goes on to say, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (vv. 17–18). Paul even tells us that “knowledge” without love is not true knowledge: “We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know. But the man who loves God is known by God” (1 Cor. 8:1–3).

To defend the Christian faith with a quarrelsome spirit is to defend Christianity plus quarrelsomeness—a self-destructive hybrid. True Christianity—the Christianity we are called to defend with word and life—says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9),³³ and, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom. 12:18).³⁴

³²I am aware, of course, that one can commit both violations at once: speaking falsehoods without love!

³³See my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) and Dennis Johnson’s sermon on “Peacemakers,” added as an appendix.

³⁴I grant that many passages of the Bible from the prophets, Jesus, and the

Hear also Peter, again in our theme text, urging the

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virtues of “gentleness” and “respect.” Gentleness is the way of love and peacemaking, a trait quite opposed to the contentious spirit. In circles like my own that emphasize (rightly, in my view) a militant orthodoxy, gentleness is the most neglected of the biblical virtues. Is it possible to be militant and gentle at the same time? Of course. Let the Lord Jesus himself and his apostles show us the way.³⁵

“Respect” is the NIV translation of the Greek word *phobos*, “fear.” Those translations which use the term “fear” perhaps intend it to be taken as the fear of God (the NASB says “reverence”), or at least the apologist’s perception of the spiritual dangers of the situation. “Respect” would mean treating the unbeliever as what he is—a person created in the image of God. It would mean not talking down to him, but listening to him—not belittling him, but taking seriously his questions and ideas. Either idea would be in accord with other scriptural teachings. The bottom line is that we should relate the apologetic encounter to God and his purposes, rather than allow our own emotional evaluation of the unbeliever to dictate our approach to him.

apostles do not sound very “peaceful.” These men were willing to use very strong, angry language when necessary. On many occasions, however, they showed much patience and gentleness. In my view, strong language is appropriate against people (1) who claim to have some religious teaching authority, and (2) are proclaiming false doctrine on serious matters, leading believers astray, or are dishonoring orthodox doctrine by ungodly lives, and (3) have ignored clear and graciously expressed warnings that their conduct displeased God. The Protestant Reformers used similarly strong language (which can usually be justified on these principles). Most of those today who are seeking to emulate the biblical and Reformation writers in this respect are overdoing it, in my opinion. They should learn to give at least equal attention to peacemaking. See my *Evangelical Reunion*, especially the appendix containing Dennis Johnson’s sermon.

³⁵Note the preceding footnote in this respect.