

# A Short Explanation and Defense of Presuppositional Apologetics by Grover Gunn

*This paper is available from Southern Presbyterian Press, the publishing arm of Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. For more information, e-mail Mr. Andy Wortman at awortman@carol.net.*

---

Christian apologetics is the science of defending the Christian faith against intellectual accusations and objections whether they come from hostile skeptics or sincere seekers. The classic Scriptural foundation for Christian apologetics is the admonition of the uneducated Galilean fisherman Peter that we must ". . . always be ready to give a defense (Greek: *apologia*) to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15). The New Testament also provides specific examples of the actual execution of the apologetic task. For example, when the learned Paul of Tarsus shared his simple Christian testimony with an angry crowd at Jerusalem, he began with the words, "Men, brethren, and fathers, hear my defense (Greek: *apologia*) before you now" (Acts 21:1; cf. 26:24). Because of clear Biblical statements such as these, few dispute the fact of the Christian's apologetic duty. What is disputed is the proper method and approach to use in fulfilling this Biblical obligation.

There are two basic apologetic methods common among Reformed theologians: evidentialism and presuppositionalism. These two approaches basically differ in their understanding of the relationship of the apologetic task of defending the faith to the theological and evangelical task of sharing the faith. According to evidentialism, Christian apologetics is a form of pre-evangelism<sup>1</sup>, an intellectual preparation that precedes the actual gospel presentation. It is a philosophical and empirical task that is logically prior to any theological considerations.

According to evidentialism, the Christian witness to the non-christian inquirer should initially set aside the existence of God<sup>2</sup>, the claims of Christ<sup>3</sup> and the authority of the Bible<sup>4</sup>. The evidentialist argues that since these are the very points to be proven, simply to assert their validity from the beginning would be to argue in a circle and to beg the question.<sup>5</sup> Also, these religious elements could offend or threaten the non-believer and intellectually alienate him before

the Christian witness has had an opportunity to gain a hearing. The Christian witness should instead seek out a neutral arena, some non-threatening intellectual environment common to both the believer and the skeptic. And what better common ground than the axiomatic foundations of logic and science: the law of non-contradiction, the law of causality and the reliability of human sense perceptions? The evidentialist's challenge to the skeptic is that if he the skeptic will acknowledge the axiomatic validity of these three principles, then he the evidentialist will demonstrate the probable truthfulness of Christianity. Taking these axioms as common ground, the evidentialist first attempts to prove from logic and nature the philosophical necessity of the existence of a supreme being. That accomplished, he then endeavors to prove from historical considerations the empirical probability of the validity of the miracles in the Bible, especially the resurrection of Christ. The evidentialist then points out to the skeptic that the Bible claims to be the very Word of God. Therefore, argues the evidentialist, because of the philosophical necessity of a supreme being and the historical probability of Biblical miracles, the skeptic should take the Bible's claim seriously and consider its message.

Presuppositionalists disagree with the above described apologetic method. The presuppositional position is that one should not try to isolate the apologetic task from the evangelical witness and the theological context. One should not set aside the authoritative claims of God, Christ and Scripture in a quest for common ground with the skeptic. Nor should one grant the hypothetical possibility of a world independent of God that can successfully function and be successfully understood in terms of the axioms of logic and science. If the Christian apologist begins his argumentation with the assumption that man can successfully use logic and science to analyze and judge reality irrespective of the truth of Christianity, then the apologist has from the beginning abandoned the Christ "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3) and who gives epistemological "light to every man who comes into the world" (John 1:9). To say that logic and science are God-neutral common ground is to deny the existence of the sovereign God of Scripture "for [whom] and through [whom] and to [whom] are all things" (Romans 11:36). To say that the impersonal axioms of logic and science are the most basic principles of reality is to deny the Christ who "is before all things, and in [whom] all things consist" (Colossians 1:17). The Christ of Scripture is the Christ apart from whom man can do nothing (John 15:5). To seek to build one's philosophical and scientific house apart from the God of Scripture is to labor in vain (Psalm 127:1). In its quest for common ground with the skeptic, evidentialism makes concessions that compromise the very essence of Biblical Christianity.

Not only does evidentialism concede too much, it seeks to prove too little. The most evidentialism claims to be able to do is to prove the probable truth of Christianity. But if Christianity is only probably true, then Christianity is also possibly false. The presuppositionalist seeks to prove that the non-christian world and life view is thoroughly self-contradictory and therefore totally untenable and that the Christian view of reality is of necessity true. The presuppositionalist is not satisfied with defending the faith in terms of mere probabilities.

But, objects the evidentialist, with these limitations, a rational defense of Christianity simply is not possible. Without presupposing logical and scientific axioms as a basis for objectively proving Christianity, Christian truth becomes an arbitrary assertion and Christian faith becomes an irrational leap. No, counters the presuppositionalist, that is a false dilemma. There is a third way which both respects the ultimacy of divine authority and rationally demonstrates the truth of Christianity. This third way, which avoids the opposite extremes of blind faith and rationalism, looks beyond logical and scientific axioms to life's most ultimate presuppositions.

The apologetic task must be carried out on this most ultimate level because, contrary to evidentialism, regenerate man and non-regenerate man cannot agree upon some common scales upon which to weigh evidence. Contrary to evidentialism, the non-regenerate man's most ultimate measure of reality is not the axioms of logic and science. Totally depraved man has a more basic commitment, and he would accept an irrational and chaotic world where logic and science have no basis in objective reality before he would compromise his true ultimate commitment. After all, is that not the very world accepted by modern man in post-Kantian secular philosophy? Fallen man's most ultimate axiomatic commitment is not to logic and science but to his belief in the lie of Satan.

What is Satan's lie to mankind? We find this lie in the serpent's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Satan's pseudo-gospel is that man can be as God in the sense of being his own ultimate authority and do so successfully. Since there can be only one truly ultimate authority, the most ultimate authority cannot be both the Word of God and the word of man. Satan challenged man to put "God in the dock," elevating himself over the Word of God as its judge. If the Word of God is true, it is only because man has judged it to be true. And, says Satan, the Word of God cannot be totally true because God has said that man cannot do what is right in man's own eyes and succeed. God has said, In the day man eats of the forbidden fruit, he will die. But, says Satan, sinful man will not die. Man can successfully have ultimate authority and live. Man can

successfully be as God. Man can be the measure of all things and the master of his own destiny and his world won't fall apart. That is Satan's big lie. And that is fallen man's most basic philosophical commitment.

Both before and after the fall, man psychologically started with himself as the immediate agent of his own thought and experience. But only after the fall did man presuppositionally start with himself as the ultimate measure of reality. Before the fall, man sought to think God's thoughts after Him and to interpret experience in the light of God's Word. After the fall, man became a "free thinker" and sought to sovereignly give the brute facts of an impersonal universe their original definition. Fallen man's commitment to Satan's lie as his ultimate presupposition is the foundation of fallen man's total life orientation. The result is that fallen man has a radical sin bias that blinds him to truth about God and Christ and Scripture. Natural man walks in the futility of his mind, having his understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in him, because of the hardening of his heart (Ephesians 4:17-18).

The problem is not that natural man in the pagan environment has no witness to God's truth. The whole world is pulsating with the revelation of God (Psalm 19); there is no escaping it. And man, the creature created in God's image, also has an inner witness to God's truth (Romans 2:14-16). The problem is not a lack of revelation but natural man's interpretation of this revelation. Knowledge of the true and living God bombards fallen man, but he "suppresses the truth in unrighteousness" and "exchange(s) the truth of God for the lie" (Romans 1:18,25). Fallen man takes the objective knowledge of general revelation and subjectively filters it through his sin orientation throughout the cognition process. The route from revelation to theology is interpretation, and natural man can only interpret in terms of his radical sin bias. Thus natural man always has a natural theology, but natural man's natural theology is always an idol making theology. Pagan theology is never an abridged version of truth waiting for the Bible to flesh it out. Pagan theology is never a stepping stone to Christianity. Pagan theology is always a comprehensive and antagonistic perversion of God's general revelation. Natural man's natural theology always produces a "god" whose existence does not contradict Satan's lie, and such a "god" by definition cannot be the sovereign Lord God of Scripture. Marduk and Dagon and Molech and Baal and Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" are all in the same class and category; they are all depraved idols, not partial descriptions of the true and the living God which are true as far as they go.

In spite of general revelation, the pagan world does not know the true and the living God because of the distorting nature of worldly wisdom (1 Corinthians

1:21). Fallen man's intellectual sin bias is so basic and so complete that even when he is exposed to God's truth in plain language through the special revelation of Scripture, he still does not know God's truth in any spiritually significant sense (1 Corinthians 2:14). He knows but he does not know (Isaiah 6:9). The god of this age has blinded his mind (2 Corinthians 4:4). He is like an illiterate man with an open book in his hands (Isaiah 29:12). He sees God's truth spelled out before him but he cannot grasp its meaning, for to rationally comprehend God's truth is to be persuaded by it and to submit to it in faith. To know the formal content of God's special revelation and not to believe is to see without perceiving (cf. Acts 28:24-28).

The way to deal with fallen man is not to cater to his illusions by telling him he has the authority and ability to weigh the truth of God in the scales of autonomous reason. The way to deal with fallen man is to argue against his illusions and to expose Satan's lie for what it is. For man to reject the true and living God and to seek to be as God is to choose death. And not just physical death but multidimensional death and radical death, death that reaches every area of life and penetrates to the very heart of life.

Man through sin has separated himself from God, but God in common grace continues to uphold life for both the just and the unjust. Fallen man continues to live and function not because of his world view but in spite of it. We must seek to show fallen man that his world view contradicts his own life experience. Man values logic, but apart from God, there is no reason why the mental laws of logic should have any true correspondence to objective reality. Man values science, but apart from God, there is no adequate basis for any real order and design in the universe or any assurance that man is really in touch with objective reality through his senses. Man values ethics, but apart from God, morals are merely changing conventions, and today's abomination can become tomorrow's virtue. Man values human personhood, but apart from God, man is but a higher animal or even an advanced machine, and personal existence is a temporary evolutionary fluke in an impersonal universe. Man values purpose and meaning, but apart from God, these have no real basis. If fallen man is right in his world view, then all in the world that is precious dies. The apologist must press home without compromise the point that philosophy and science based not upon Christ but upon the first principles of the world are "empty deceit" (Colossians 1:8) and "foolishness" (1 Corinthians 3:18-19). Even as the skeptic argues against God, he is using logic and language, which exist and have meaning only because of God. As Van Til has said, the skeptic is like the small child who is able to slap his father's face only because his father is holding him up.

Apart from the regenerating grace of God, fallen man will rebel against these arguments. Apart from the regenerating grace of God, he will continue to cling to his lie. He will argue that finite man and pagan gods really are an adequate foundation for a meaningful world. Or he will sink into intellectual skepticism and arrogantly boast of his ability to live in a meaningless world without resorting to the psychological crutch of Christianity. Or, more commonly, he will find some dialectical mix of false faith and proud despair. All the Christian can do is to argue from the Bible that the man who says there is no Jehovah God is truly a fool and that the forbidden fruit will indeed turn to gravel in his mouth. We plead and argue, but only God can cause the blind to see and the deaf to hear.

After seeking to drive the non-christian "below the line of despair" by demonstrating the self-contradictory nature of his world, the Christian then points him to the one solid Rock upon which he can build a valid world and life view. And of course that one solid Rock is Christ. The apologist presents Christ as the Sovereign Savior and Lord and proclaims His Word as ultimate, self-authenticating truth. In the final analysis, we accept the authority of God's Word simply because it is God's Word (*Westminster Confession*, 1.4). Just as God can swear by no one higher than Himself, there is also no higher authority than God's Word upon which to base our acceptance of God's Word. The importance of this simple principle cannot be overstated. The apologist can argue transcendently that human logic and science have no adequate foundation apart from the Word of the true and the living God. He cannot make human logic and science his self-authenticating authorities and then use these to prove God. Logic and science derive their authenticity and authority from God, not *vice versa*.<sup>6</sup>

What then is the proper place for evidence in the apologetic task? Evidences must be presented in the defining context of the gospel message. We must reject the notion that we can somehow use evidences and logical arguments apart from the gospel context to prepare the skeptic's heart and mind for the gospel message. It is in the context of the preached Word that God works His work of regenerating grace which enables the spiritually blind to see and believe. Evidences, no matter how compelling, do not convince those who have not submitted to God's Word in faith (Luke 16:31). Because of the noetic effects of sin, fallen man must be born from above in order to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). True intellectual submission to Biblical evidences is not a mental preparation for faith; it is a part of the phenomenon of faith. Biblical evidences confirm and strengthen faith only in the context of faith. Fallen man submits to the "arguments whereby [holy scripture] doth abundantly evidence

itself to be the word of God" only in the context of "the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts" (*Westminster Confession*, 1.5).

We must also reject this idea that we can prove Christianity without concurrently defining what Christianity is. We must not seek to separate the *that* (the bare fact) from the *what* (the Biblical significance) of apologetic evidences. The Biblical significance is so closely tied to the historical facts of Christianity that to try to separate and isolate these is to destroy them both. The non-christian might accept the probability of the resurrection of Jesus as a bare historical fact isolated from the claims of the Christ of Scripture and the Biblical interpretation of the resurrection event. But who is Jesus apart from the claims of Christ? He is not the Jesus of Scripture. To accept the "bare fact" apart from the Biblical definition is not even historical faith. The demons have historical faith (James 2:19), but they both believe and tremble. The resurrection of Jesus is a reason for trembling only as it is Biblically defined. Apart from the Biblical definition, the resurrection of "Jesus" is merely an entertaining historical curiosity that belongs in "Ripley's Believe It or Not."

In our witnessing, we do present evidence but only in the defining context of the Word. We have the historical evidences of miracles, especially the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and fulfilled prophecy. We have the testimonies of changed lives. We have a basis for science in the God who created an orderly universe of design and gave man both senses that really are in touch with objective reality and rational minds with a logic that really does measure truth in the created realm. We have a basis for purpose, meaning and morality, for the ultimate reality is the personal God of Scripture and not an impersonal universe or impersonal axioms. We accept God as God and we find flowing out of this a world that is the real world, and everyone in their heart of hearts knows it.

Here we find the true common ground between Christian and non-christian. They both live in the real world created by God and covered with His finger prints. They were both created in God's image. They both know in their heart of hearts that the God of Scripture is the true and the living God and that the Bible is His Book. But, as I said in the beginning, the Christian and the non-christian do not agree on this common ground. Only the born again Christian has admitted to himself what all men in their innermost being know to be true. The non-christian remains self-deceived and is blinded by his love for Satan's lie.

With presuppositional apologetics, the uneducated Galilean fisherman or even the child can have a truly effective apologetic, like the apologetic found in the

children's song: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And yet this apologetic is not mindless or arbitrary. It does not throw out evidence but acknowledges that evidence can have its proper significance and impact only in the context of saving faith. It defends the faith without idolatrously elevating human reason above God (rationalism) or abandoning reason altogether (irrationalism).

The rationalistic apologetic is summarized in the statement associated with Thomas Aquinas, "I believe because I understand." The irrational, fideistic apologetic is summarized in the statement associated with Tertullian, "I believe what is absurd." The presuppositional apologetic is summarized in the statement associated with St. Augustine of Hippo, "I believe; therefore, I understand." Contrary to rationalism, human reason is not a religiously neutral or independent realm that is philosophically prior to faith. Contrary to irrationalism, human reason need not be a futile and impossible task that is contrary to true faith. Consistent with presuppositionalism, the realm of true faith encompasses all and is prior to all, including logic and science, and only in the context of faith is a rational and orderly world possible.

---

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Though apologetics may not be evangelism, it is a vital part of pre-evangelism." Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*, p. 21.
- <sup>2</sup> "We must begin with our reason even before we know that there is a God who validates it." *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- <sup>3</sup> "This all shows that sound apologetics cannot begin with the inspired Bible or even with a divine Christ." *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- <sup>4</sup> "From an uninspired Bible we are arguing for miracles, and from miracles we are arguing for an inspired Bible." *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- "We have traveled not in a circular path back to where we began but up to Jacob's ladder anchored on earth in a merely human and historical Bible into the heavenlies of a divinely inspired Word of God." *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- "We have proven, independently of the inspired Bible, that the Bible is the Word of God . . ." *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- <sup>5</sup> "The problem arises . . . when we make God a question-begging first principle of epistemology." *Ibid.*, p. 89.

Humans can have the subjective experience of knowing without acknowledging God

even though all human experience is dependent upon God as the Creator and Sustainer of life. But can man have a valid and viable epistemology (a philosophical explanation of the subjective knowing experience and its relationship to objective reality) without acknowledging the true and living God? The presuppositionalist's answer to this question is no, and the above quotation is an evidentialist criticism of this position.

<sup>6</sup> A transcendental argument is an argument that something must be true because of the impossibility of the contrary. The book *Classical Apologetics* argues transcendentially for the axioms of logic and science:

"In a sense, we are proceeding in a kind of transcendental fashion asking the question, 'What are the assumptions necessary for life and knowledge to be possible?' At this point we are not inquiring about ontological prerequisites to life and truth, but epistemological prerequisites." *Ibid.*, p. 71.

"In our search for common assumptions, we isolate three which are held by theists and nontheists alike. There may be far more than three, but these three represent the bare minimum of working non-negotiable assumptions. The three basic assumptions are: 1. The validity of the law of noncontradiction; 2. The validity of the law of causality; 3. The basic reliability of sense perception." *Ibid.*, pp. 71-72.

---