

A CRASH COURSE IN  
PRESUPPOSITIONAL  
APOLOGETICS

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## WHAT IS APOLOGETICS?

Apologetics is the vindication of the Christian world-and-life view over and against the various forms of the non-Christian world-and-life view. (VT)

## WHAT IS PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS?

Presuppositional apologetics is a biblical approach to defending the faith that is committed to setting Christ apart as Lord ; hence it rejects human autonomy (1 Pt. 3:15). Pre. apo. presupposes the truthfulness and authority of God's Word. Nothing is permitted to stand over Scripture as its judge; nothing is needed to stand below Scripture as its support. Rather Scripture itself is the foundation and judge of all truth. It comes to us with unquestionable and unassailable authority. Scripture must be our starting point in all our reasoning, it must be the light in which we see everything. The presuppositional approach acknowledges the lordship of Christ from the outset of the apologetic encounter. As Prov. 1:7 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" This is our message: There is no true understanding of anything (God, the world, ourselves) apart from fearing God. Unless you believe in the Christian God, you cannot logically believe in anything else. As Van Til has said, the best proof for the existence of God is that without him you cannot prove anything at all! Clearly, our challenge to the unbeliever is total: it is all or nothing. It is the very essence of Christianity to reject all compromise.

## HOW IS THE PRESUPPOSITIONAL APPROACH DIFFERENT FROM THE MORE POPULAR EVIDENTIAL, OR CLASSICAL APPROACH?

Don't let the names of these two schools of thought fool you. Presuppositional apologists are not opposed to the use of evidences. On the other hand, evidentialists (along with every one else) have presuppositions. The difference is over the role that evidences and presuppositions play in encounter with the unbeliever.

\*The presuppositional approach gives evidences (facts) a limited but useful role in the apologetic enterprise. Evidences do not serve the function evidentialists think they do, but they do come in handy:

1)Encourage believers - Many Christians have had their faith strengthened by considering the countless evidences for Christianity. In fact, as we begin to more and more look at the world through the eyeglasses of Scripture, we will see that the evidences for Christian. are much broader than we may have realized! Often, evidences are thought to limited to such things as the fulfillment of prophecy, specific archaeological data, consistency of Scripture, etc. These are evidences, to be sure. But there is a very real sense I which every fact we encounter in the creation, when looked at properly, evidences the existence of the Christian God. Ps. 19 and Rom. 1 both tell us that every facet of the created order (including man himself) screams out that God exists. The evidences are innumerable and inescapable - if a person refuses to trust in the Christian God it is never due to a lack of information. (But this is of course is precisely why the evidentialist

approach is inadequate - the unbeliever does not need additional evidences; he needs to forsake his commitment to autonomy)

2) Embarrass unbelievers - Some times throwing out a few irrefutable evidences for Christianity can “bait the hook” for an unbeliever so he will listen to a fuller presentation of the Christian worldview. Often, unbelievers will dismiss Christianity. out of hand without even considering it as a serious option. But catching them off guard by pointing out some piece of evidence that clearly points to the truth of Christianity. can at least get a hearing. You may show..

[Ex: evolution - erosion and age of the earth; gaps in the fossil record; sexual differentiation; complexity of the eye; etc.]

[Ex: personal testimony can occasionally disarm an otherwise hostile unbeliever - but, of course it is by no means adequate as an apologetic and we never want to give the impression that we think Christianity is true b/c we “experienced” it]

\*That being said, a biblical apologist must go far beyond a simple appeal to evidences or facts in virtually all cases. One person may see a certain fact as irrefutable evidence for his position. But another person, with a different worldview, may look at that same fact, and because he has very different presuppositions, he may interpret the fact in a radically different way - in a way that makes it evidence for his worldview. An appeal to so called “brute facts” is simply insufficient. Both the Christian and the non-Christian will claim to have the “logical” or “factual” position.

[Ex: the same amino acids are in all living things - both creationists and evolutionists use this to prove their point of view]

[Ex: facts alone are generally insufficient to show someone the futility of a non-Christian position - see Lk. 16:30-31; plagues on Egypt - Pharaoh had first hand experience of God’s power and still didn’t believe; Pharisees witnessed miracles of Christ]

The unbeliever views the facts in a framework that is basically hostile to Christianity. CVT said its like the unbeliever is wearing yellow tinted glasses that cemented to his face and color his interpretation of everything - including of course whatever evidence the apologist presents. Every fact in God’s universe clearly bears his signature; every piece of creation has his name imprinted on it - but somehow the unbeliever finds a way to misread it, even if it means believing foolish lies instead of God’s truth (Rom. 1:25). Therefore when we speak to the unbeliever about Christ we cannot approach him as though he were a neutral, objective observer. We must remember he has an ax to grind with God; he hates God and he and God are not on “speaking terms”. Of course the unbeliever may claim to be neutral and unbiased, but we cannot believe his self diagnosis; we must trust Scripture’s diagnosis, which is quite unflattering to say the least (Rom. 3:11, 8:7, Eph. 2:1ff, etc.]. Neutrality is a myth, a false pretense. There is no common standard, no common reference point between the Christian and non-Christian. We’re NOT like two lawyers arguing a case - when lawyers argue in court they share the same ultimate standard. In the apologetic encounter between a Christian and non-Christian., there are two ultimate standards going head to head: the God of Scripture and autonomous man. We do not share a common set of scales, or balances, on which we can weigh the evidence. We cannot speak of “reason” or “logic” in general as if the Christian

and non-Christian. viewed the role and function of reason in the same way. When it comes to neutrality, remember: they aren't and you shouldn't try to be. Not only is neutrality impossible, its immoral to try to be neutral - we are to set Christ apart as Lord in our hearts in all we do, not take a neutral stance (Mt. 12:30). Therefore our apologetic method is not a matter of personal preference, it is a matter of the lordship of Christ over all of life including our intellect. We are commanded to take every thought captive and bring it into obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10). Every unbeliever is like Eve in the garden in Gen.3. She set herself up as ultimate judge, as the final authority, who would decide for herself if God's Word were true. She would render the verdict, rather than submitting to God's revealed command. But we can't put God's Word to the test (Mt. 4:7). Rather, God's Word IS the test of what is true, what is real, what is right. Christianity should never be presented as a hypothesis to be tested and evaluated by men, as though some things were more certain and more ultimate than Scripture. Unregenerate man makes himself the measure of all things; he thinks he can put everything on the scale of his own reason or experience, and weigh it properly. As Christian. apologists, we do want to put facts and evidences his scales - BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY THAN THAT WE WANT TO CHALLENGE THE WAY HIS SCALES WORK! We cannot simply assume that by giving him more information or evidence, he will see the hopelessness of all non-Christian. thought and the utter rationality of Christianity. Because his scales are not neutral and because they are fallen and no longer work properly, we must get to the heart of the matter: the unbeliever is presupposing his own ultimacy or autonomy - he thinks he is independent of God.

#### NOW WE CAN TAKE OUR DEFINITIONS OF PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS ONE STEP FURTHER:

Presuppositional apologetics is a biblical approach because it refuses to compromise with fallen man's commitment to independence. It challenges the unbeliever at the core of his worldview, attacking his most basic premise. The unbeliever's problem is never a lack of information - even if he never meets a Christian or hears of Jesus, he has seen enough evidence for God's existence to be justly condemned (Rom. 1:18ff). The unbeliever's ultimate problem is not intellectual but moral - his problem is rebellion against God with his whole being. It is this rebellion that we want to uncover and expose as futile. We intend to show him that he has no could reason for rejecting Christianity - all that holds him back is a culpable and stubborn unwillingness. Because he is in revolt against God while living in God's universe, we want to (tenderly, gently, humbly) show him that his worldview is self-refuting. We want to show that it is internally inconsistent, that it is "foolish" to use biblical language. We want to show that his worldview, if consistently (and that's a key word) lived out, can not provide a basis for sanity. We want to ask: What foundations must the house of human knowledge have? And then we want to show only the Christian worldview provides these foundation pillars; the unbeliever's worldview cannot provide the preconditions, or prerequisites, for the intelligibility of human experience. We want to show the fool his folly, the folly of rejecting the one true God who gives him life and breath and everything else he has; the God who is the source of all truth; the God who is inescapably revealed everywhere; the God who the unbeliever knows to be true in his heart of hearts, yet continues to suppress against his better knowledge.

## APOLOGETICS IN ACTION - PROVERBS 26:4,5

By now the procedure we need to use should be somewhat clear: we want to do a *reductio ad absurdum* on the unbeliever's position - we want to reduce it to absurdity, showing that any worldview that doesn't presuppose the authority of Christ is a dead end street, a downward spiral into oblivion. There are many ways for the presuppositionalist to demonstrate to the unbeliever the futility of his thought. The presuppositional approach is flexible enough to deal with any unbelieving worldview and show that it is filled with schizophrenic tension points that render it intellectually suicidal. But it is not enough to eliminate the competition; we must also demonstrate that Christianity does provide a basis for understanding the world and making sense out of reality. It is internally consistent and absolutely reasonable. We seek to compare the Christian worldview to the unbeliever's worldview and show there is really no comparison. Only Christianity can account for those things we all hold dear: reason, truth, values/ethics, love, beauty, science, human personhood/personality/dignity, language, meaning/purpose, etc. Without Christianity, these things would disappear; only a Christian foundation can support them. One Christian apologist put it this way:

Man through sin has separated himself from God, but God in his common grace continues to uphold life for both the just and the unjust. Fallen man continues to live and function not because of his worldview but in spite of it. We must seek to show fallen man that his worldview 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 worldview then all in the world that is precious dies. The apologist must press home without compromise that philosophy and science based not upon Christ but upon the first principles of the world are "empty deceit" (Col. 2:8) and foolishness (1 Cor. 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...the skeptic is like the small child who is able to slap his father's face only because his father is holding him up.

We want to conclusively demonstrate that meaning, logic, science, ethics, dignity, etc. all find grounding only in the Christian worldview - without him they would disappear. But just as these concepts are inescapable, so is the Christian God. We argue from the impossibility of the contrary, showing anything contrary to Christianity is impossible - it destroys all meaning, knowledge, rationality, morality, etc. The unbeliever functions in this world only because he is inconsistent, only because he steals from the Christian worldview. It is because he does NOT live up to what he professes to believe that he is able to make it in this world. Meanwhile, he is unwittingly depending on the very God

he claims to reject.

Now these are bold, radical claims that the Christian apologist makes - but is this not exactly what Paul does in 1 Cor. 1:20? Let us now proceed to give some substance to these claims so you can see their truthfulness.

#### ARGUMENTS: TAKING ON ALL COMERS

1. Atheists and Agnostics - Pratt does a great job showing the folly of these two positions - both of them clearly fall into what he calls the “certainty-uncertainty” dilemma and cannot get out of this trap:

One way in which the futility of non-Christian philosophy can be seen regards the question of God’s existence. On the one hand, the unbeliever may be atheist, holding that it is *absolutely certain* that there is no God. In holding this view, however, the unbeliever attempts to ignore the fact that his limited investigation of the universe and beyond compels him on his own ground to be *totally uncertain* about God’s existence. Since the unbeliever has not examined all the possible evidence for God’s existence, he cannot be *absolutely certain* that He does not exist. This does not mean, however, that the unbeliever may safely claim that God’s existence is uncertain. In taking this stance of agnosticism, he is thrown into the same dilemma as the atheist. The unbeliever holds this view of *total uncertainty* while ignoring that agnosticism necessarily involves the *absolute certainty* that God has not made Himself known in such a way as to demand recognition and submission from all men. The agnostic is absolutely certain that God’s existence is uncertain. As a result, the unbeliever cannot deny, or claim ignorance of, the existence of God without exhibiting the futility of his rebellion against God.

But sometimes the atheist or agnostic will overtly challenge the Christian worldview. Usually this challenge comes from one of three areas: logic, science, or ethics

a. Let’s suppose the unbeliever challenges us from the perspective of ethics: he raises the problem of evil (which is...) One of the premises in his argument is “evil exists.” This is where we want to challenge him. How, according to an atheistic worldview, can distinctions between good and evil be justified? Who defines good and evil? If man is just the product of random impersonal forces, how can morality even exist? The atheist has no absolute standard to appeal to - evil isn’t evil in the atheist worldview, it’s just a matter of personal preference. Ethical relativism isn’t “ethical” at all - it’s the denial of ethics. The atheist has to borrow ideas about right and wrong from the Christian worldview to even state his objection to Christianity. Right and wrong, good and evil, are completely arbitrary and meaningless without God. Sartre says this: “without an infinite reference point, all finite points are absurd.

b. Suppose he attacks us from the perspective of science. It is commonly assumed that the Bible and science can never be compatible. And this is true as long as science is done on the foundation of man’s autonomy rather than the solid rock of Scripture. But whenever the unbeliever appeals to apostate, autonomous science, we should reverse the

challenge and show that science is possible only within the Christian worldview. How do we show this? It's easy.

Science requires certain conditions, just as a house requires a foundation. The most basic of these is order, or the uniformity of nature. Without order in nature, scientific experiments and prediction would be impossible. Imagine if water froze at 32 degrees only some of the time. You simply couldn't do science. So, we want to ask the unbeliever, "What reason do you have for assuming that nature will behave in an orderly fashion? Your scientific efforts prove that you do make this assumption. Justify it." The bottom line is that he can't. The problem for the atheist is only exacerbated when we consider that most atheist say the universe, man, and everything else is the result of chance. If the universe is really what the unbeliever say it is, science would be impossible. You see, atheistic scientist make a blind faith commitment to something that doesn't fit with the rest of their worldview. They assume nature is uniform, but they have no reason for doing so.

A Christian on the other hand, does have a reason for expecting nature to behave orderly and hence the Christian worldview provides a basis for science. The Scriptures teach God ordinarily controls His universe in a stable, law-like fashion; in God's covenant with Noah, He promised to maintain order until the end. And so in Scripture, science is given a firm basis. God is a God of order, not confusion.

You see the unbelievers worldview is not merely incomplete; it is utterly unintelligible. His rejection of God, his presupposition of his own ultimacy is foolish and destructive of all knowledge. We could go on and show this in other areas: logic, meaning, human dignity, beauty, and so on are all concepts that only find grounding in the Christian worldview. And if the unbeliever were consistent with his own worldview, he would not only throw out Christianity but also everything else: rationality, science, human dignity, ethical judgments, etc. It is one thing to profess unbelief, it is another thing to live it.

Atheism cannot argue ethically, scientifically or logically against the Christian faith. The atheist has no reason for defying God, yet he does it anyway. No objection to Christianity can be justified.

2. World Religions - Again, when we deal with other religions, we deal with a wide variety of objections to Christianity, and there are many ways we argue against these false faiths within a biblical, presuppositional framework. Our arguments should always be rooted in the unchanging truth of Scripture, but must be person-variable, that is, flexible enough to deal with all kinds of encounters. So when you hear my arguments, don't think they're the best or only ones you can use.

I will take three very common religions: Hinduism, Islam and Mormonism

a. Hinduism - says all distinctions are illusions (monistic worldview - all is one) hence, Hinduism is irrational, illogical - no logical distinctions. Of course, Hindus claim that our problem is that we are still entrapped by Western logic. We need to meditate (yoga)

to enter Nirvana. So what do you say to the Hindu. You say, "Look, you claim there are no distinctions in reality. You claim all distinctions are illusory. Yet you argue and live as though there were distinctions. For example, you distinguish my position and yours. You say you and I are one because all is one - therefore my opinion and your opinion are one. So how can you say I am entrapped by something you are not? You say I should meditate so I'll enter Nirvana, but that presupposes you can distinguish between where I am now, in the realm of illusion, and Nirvana." The Hindu will say, "There you go with your Western categories of logic. Yes, my position looks contradictory to you. But I deny the law of contradiction itself." At this point the apologist's task is quite easy. Any worldview that claims to reject logic is going to defeat itself. Because it has denied the logical distinction between true and false, it can't possibly be true -- for in claiming to be true, it would also be false. All mystical irrational religions reduce to nonsense. They cannot save rationality, which we all inescapably use. They claim there are no distinctions, but even in communicating they distinguish one word from another, and your worldview from theirs. Their position is inescapably false and simply unlivable. When you show the unbeliever the absurdity, the folly of unbelief, you have completed the task of apologetics.

[Hinduism and morality - see Persuasions pg. 86 - good and evil become one; why *ought* I to pursue Nirvana?]

b. Muslims - This may seem a little tough because the Islamic worldview appears to be able to counterfeit the Christian worldview - it has an all-powerful deity, a sacred book, and so on. But still the procedure of Prov. 26:4-5 works well. The key is to internally critique what the Muslim believes. Let me give a few examples.

1. The Koran itself claims to be a later revelation in the line of Moses, David, and Jesus - in other words, they too were prophets of Allah. So the Muslim accepts a large portion of the Bible. Well, once you have that, it's over. Go to what you both claim to accept and show how his worldview contradicts it. For example, Deut. 13 and 18 give standards for true and false prophets - future prophets must teach consistently with what God has already revealed. The Koran simply doesn't do that. The Islamic faith is a Christian heresy.

2. The Koran claims that Allah is so transcendent and incomprehensible that nothing in human language can be said about him, in which case we have to ask, "Just what is the Koran anyway? If Allah cannot be revealed because of his unchanging transcendence, because of his incomprehensibility, how can the Koran be a revelation of him? [The Christian God is transcendent, but also immanent - distinct from creation yet fills it in a personal way.]

3. The Islamic faith lacks a doctrine of redemption by blood atonement. Islam teaches God is holy and just and cannot tolerate sin, yet Islam also teaches we are saved not by having our guilt paid for by a substitute shedding his blood, but by doing more good works than bad works. This is problematic: OT sacrifices- What did that foreshadow? Our bad works cannot be undone by our good works, so our guilty record



remains; and how can Allah remain just if he does not demand perfection? And a payment for guilt?

3. Islamic fatalism and human responsibility - Islam teaches Allah controls all, but it's not like the Christian doctrine of providence. Christianity teaches God is sovereign, but man is also a free and responsible agent. Allah is sovereign but his sovereignty cancels out human freedom and responsibility. We have to ask, how can Allah hold us responsible?

c. Mormonism - This is essentially a Christian heresy, a cult that steals from the Bible, but twists Scripture's message and adds to it, in the works of Joseph Smith. Very briefly: -It's helpful to compare the Christian worldview to the Mormon worldview to help the Mormon see these are two radically different worldviews. Mormonism is not an acceptable flavor of Christianity. It differs in its understanding of God, Jesus, salvation, the afterlife, and so on.

-But it's also helpful to simply take the Mormon to the Bible, since he claims to accept it, and show what it really teaches versus polytheism, deification of man, legalism.

-Critique Mormonism itself:

How do you know it's true? How can you be certain?

How do you account for its newness? and so on.

Does Joseph Smith pass the test for prophets in Deut. 18? NO!

What about a postmodernist?

This person sees the absurdity of life without God, the despair and helplessness. He is right where we want him.

1. Agree with him that life is meaningless without God

2. Show he doesn't, and can't, live that way. (ex. Sartre said without infinite reference point all is absurd. But he turned around and made moral judgments.)

Reminders:

1. Apologetics is defending the faith. It goes far beyond what we say. It's also how we say it and how we live in front of unbelievers. It is important to be able to articulate why you believe in the Christian God, why you hope in Christ, but it is just as important to show your faith in Christ by good works. Jesus said the world would recognize us not by our brilliant apologetic method but by our love for one another. Be humble, courteous, gentle, and respectful. Overwhelm him with love.

2. Apologetics must never be divorced from evangelism. There is a seamless link between the two. The goal of justifying our faith is sharing our faith, If all we do is show the unbeliever the futility of his position without pointing him to Christ we have done more harm than good. Remember also that apologetics may not be a necessary step with every unbeliever. Look at the Phillipian jailer in Acts 16. (Paul did not say, "First you must hear my defense then I will tell you how to be saved." No, he said, "Believe...")

3. We do not measure success in apologetics by the number of conversions we see or the number of arguments we win. Apologetics is not a numbers game anymore than it is an argument game. We measure success by our faithfulness and loyalty to Christ, our Lord. Only God can grant our apologetic and evangelistic efforts success because only He can change hearts. The job of the apologist is NOT to change hearts but silence mouths! We demolish arguments, cast down strongholds, and show the fool his folly, but only God can make the fool a Christian. Let us also remember, we too would be fools, on the wrong side of the antithesis between light and darkness were it not for God's intervening grace. We do not do apologetics to win others to our position or show how smart we are. We do apologetics to the glory of God. Period.