

"Few books have been so helpful, to so many, for so long
as *Apologetics* by John Frame." —R. Albert Mohler Jr.

JOHN M. FRAME
APOLOGETICS
A JUSTIFICATION OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

EDITED BY JOSEPH E. TORRES // SECOND EDITION

FOREWORD BY VERN S. POYTHRESS



“If I were asked to list the top three books that have had the greatest impact on me as a Christian thinker, John Frame’s *Apologetics to the Glory of God* would undoubtedly be one of them. It brought about a paradigm shift—one might even say a ‘Copernican revolution’—in my understanding not only of apologetics but of all other intellectual endeavors as a Christian. Ever since then, it has been the first book I recommend to those looking for an introduction to Christian apologetics, and it is required reading in my apologetics classes. I’m therefore delighted to recommend this updated and expanded twentieth-anniversary edition, which incorporates additional material by Dr. Frame, as well as many helpful annotations by Joseph Torres. *Soli Deo Gloria!*”

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

“This book is as vital as when it first appeared. John Frame manages to tackle the most difficult problems facing a Christian who endeavors to defend the faith: the nature of evil, world religions, the use of evidences, and much more. And he does so with grace, theological acumen, and an enviable straightforwardness—rare for apologists who are at home with the principal philosophical issues of the day. Extraordinarily profitable volume from a veteran Christian thinker.”

—**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Over the last several decades, few books have been as helpful to so many for so long as *Apologetics to the Glory of God* by John Frame. I eagerly welcome the twentieth-anniversary edition of this important book. As apologetics takes on an even greater significance for every believer, I can only hope that the influence and impact of this book will spread far beyond even its original publication. This is a book that, twenty years after its initial publication, is even more timely—and that is a rare achievement.”

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

“For decades, John Frame has given himself to the church, to his students, and to meticulous thinking and the rigorous study of the Bible. He winsomely, patiently, and persuasively contends for the gospel, and brings together a rare blend of big-picture thinking, levelheaded reflection, biblical fidelity, a love for the gospel and the church, and the ability to write with care and clarity.”

—**John Piper**, Chancellor, Bethlehem College and Seminary; Founder and Teacher, www.desiringGod.org

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P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Portions of this work were originally published in John M. Frame's *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (P&R Publishing, 1995), *The Doctrine of God* (P&R Publishing, 2002), and *Speaking the Truth in Love*, edited by John J. Hughes (P&R Publishing, 2009). They have been edited and revised for this volume.

Some material in chapter four appears in a similar form in John M. Frame, "Transcendental Arguments," in W. C. Campbell-Jack and Gavin J. McGrath, eds., *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*, consulting ed. C. Stephen Evans (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 716–17. Used by permission of the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Frame, John M., 1939-

[Apologetics to the glory of God]

Apologetics : a justification of Christian belief / John M. Frame ; edited by Joseph E. Torres. -- Second edition.

pages cm

Revision of: *Apologetics to the Glory of God*. 1994.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-1-59638-938-0 (pbk.) -- ISBN 978-1-59639-939-7 (ePub) -- ISBN 978-1-59638-940-3 (Mobi)

1. Apologetics. I. Torres, Joseph E., editor. II. Title.

BT1103.F73 2015

239--dc23

2014047572

To all my students,
from whom I have learned much

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FOREWORD

This second, expanded edition of John Frame's book on apologetics is a vital and welcome contribution, because apologetics continues to be an important area for us to think through. It is important not only for people who are especially interested in evangelism and apologetics, but for every Christian believer. In many prestigious institutions in the West, hostility to Christianity has increased. The need for wise presentation and defense of the Christian faith has therefore also increased. I commend this book to the attention of Christians everywhere because it helps us to live as Christians, in accord with what God did to renew us when he brought us to know Christ and to bow to him as Lord.

What more should be said? I will briefly underline a few salient points that Frame's book expounds at length.

Being a Disciple

The Bible has instructions and insights that affect every area of life, including apologetics. Our conduct is not the basis for our salvation, but is influenced by our salvation. The Bible indicates that God brings salvation to those who trust in Jesus. This salvation is a gift of God's grace, not something that we earn or deserve on the basis of achievement. We do not try to transform ourselves in order to be saved. Rather, God saves us by reaching out to us in our state of sin and alienation from him. But then any person who is saved is also transformed by the power of God.

Romans 12:1–2 illustrates this principle. The preceding chapters, in Romans 1–11, reflect on the meaning of salvation. Then, as an implication of salvation, Romans 12:1–2 exhorts believers to be renewed in their minds:

I appeal to you *therefore*, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your

spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but *be transformed by the renewal of your mind*, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

A Christian believer is not supposed to just lie still, relax, and enjoy the salvation already given to him. He is to be active in serving the Lord, like an athlete or a farmer working hard (1 Cor. 9:24–26; 2 Tim. 2:5–6). Jesus says, “If you love me, you will *keep my commandments*” (John 14:15).

To put it another way, “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20). A person who truly trusts in Christ has given up every other loyalty in order to be loyal to Christ alone. He has become a disciple of Christ:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and *even his own life*, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26–27)

A true disciple is never “off duty.” He is always a disciple. He is a disciple in the actions of his body, and a disciple also in the actions of his mind—a renewed mind. Consequently, he is a disciple in every word that he utters in an apologetic discussion.

Being a Disciple in Apologetics

So discipleship has implications for apologetics. If Sue is a Christian believer, she must remain a believer and act like a believer when she is in discussions with non-Christians. She cannot pretend to be religiously neutral when she evaluates religious or philosophical claims, or discusses miracles, or discusses who Jesus Christ is, or discusses the basis for moral standards. She cannot be neutral because God has already given her truth in Jesus Christ. She ought not to betray what God has given.

Of course, she must grow in knowing Christ. But she already has some fundamental answers. And God intends that she should use these answers. She knows that Jesus is indeed the Son of God, not just a prophet, not just a religious teacher. She knows that the miracles of Christ described in the Gospels are real, just as Christ is real. She knows that God’s standards for morality, such as he gives in the Ten Commandments, are expressions of true moral standards, not just relative cultural preferences. In these and many other ways, she is thinking and evaluating issues in a different way

from non-Christians. In the words of Scripture, she is committed to “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and [to] take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Her supreme loyalty is to Christ. And that loyalty gets exercised in her thinking, as well as in her bodily actions.

Christian apologetics is concerned with how Sue should present her faith positively to unbelievers, in order to invite them to Christ. But apologetics especially focuses on how Sue should defend her faith when others bring objections:

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to *make a defense* to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:15–16)

Sue’s defense of the faith should be in harmony with regarding “Christ the Lord as holy” in her heart.

The Lure of “Religious Neutrality”

Many people are tempted to picture a discussion in apologetics as a religiously neutral search for truth. Everyone supposedly starts off uncommitted and is trying to find out whether God exists, and which of the world religions might be true. According to this way of thinking, it is most important that everyone should be “unbiased.” But the Bible indicates that this picture is completely unrealistic. It contradicts the actual situation in which we live. The actual situation is that some people have been saved by the grace of God in Christ, while others are still lost.

Not all ways lead to God. Christ is the only way to God:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

The Old Testament radically rejects the worship of false gods, such as was common in the nations around Israel. Likewise, the New Testament

radically rejects other proposals for how to be saved. This rejection is not religiously neutral. But it is the truth. Christian believers have come to know the truth, and they cannot pretend to be “unbiased” in the way that a non-Christian expects them to be. Sue is already a disciple; she is already committed. And that commitment is deep. To a non-Christian, this looks “biased.”

Moreover, the Bible indicates that non-Christians already know God, the true God who made the whole world:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although *they knew God*, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. (Rom. 1:19–21)

The worship of idols is not an innocent practice, but a reaction in which a non-Christian uses idols to replace the worship of God, who is already known:

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God *for images* resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom. 1:22–23)

In short, non-Christians are biased by a commitment *against God*.

So what picture of apologetics is right? Are some people wandering around among religious possibilities in a neutral way? Or is everyone already “biased”? And if everyone is already biased, are all biases created equal? Or is there a pronounced difference between knowing the truth in Christ and not knowing it?

Whoever is not with me is *against me*, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. (Matt. 12:30)

Here is one area where loyalty to Christ matters. If we are loyal to him with our minds, we must think through apologetics in a way that rejects the idea of neutrality and accepts the Bible’s own description of the nature of the situation. Such renewed thinking is what John Frame undertakes in his book.

Working on the Basis of Prior Commitment

Such an approach has been called *presuppositional* apologetics. Why? Because we who are believers in Christ are already presupposing our loyalty to Christ and the truth about Christ presented in the Bible. The involvement of presuppositions is not an intellectual game. It is not just an exercise in logic, in which someone proposes, “Let us explore in a disinterested way where various presuppositions lead.” It is a requirement for Christian discipleship. A disciple, as we have observed, is *committed*. John Frame prefers the label *basic commitments* to *presuppositions* for this reason. The whole person is involved. No one is religiously neutral.

And not just *any* presuppositions will do. It matters in a crucial way whether we are following Christ or Buddha or Joseph Smith or Immanuel Kant. Knowing the truth in Christ leads to growing knowledge of the truth. Substituting a counterfeit for the truth leads to confusion (Prov. 4:18–19).

One of the common objections to presuppositional apologetics is that it represents an argument in a circle. “And so,” the objector says, “it has no real power to persuade anyone who is not already persuaded.” Frame handles this objection at greater length in his book.¹ But I may say a brief word here: this picture of the “circle” of presuppositional apologetics is a misunderstanding.

On the one hand, every person has a *kind* of circle, in that no one is religiously neutral. If our loyalty to Christ leads us to submitting to his teaching in the Bible, we move in a kind of circle in which the teaching of the Bible functions as our standard for sifting claims. The teaching in the Bible profoundly influences our beliefs. Among those beliefs is belief in Christ, which the Bible confirms. Analogously, people with *other basic commitments*—to reason or to pleasure—have their beliefs influenced by their commitments. We ought to acknowledge the existence of these circles, rather than try to ignore them. Given that the circles exist, we can still present evidence and arguments, just as the apostles did in their sermons in Acts, and just as the Old Testament prophets did when they called on people to turn back from idols to the living God.

In fact, the whole world offers evidence for God, as Romans 1:18–23 indicates. God is continually presenting people with the truth about himself, both through general revelation in nature and through special revelation in Scripture. Scripture in particular is designed to present the gospel, and the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to

1. Note also Joseph E. Torres’s Appendix D.

the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). The gospel leads to people’s salvation. It *does* persuade people (Acts 17:4, 12; 28:24). Through the gospel, the Holy Spirit changes people and brings them to faith. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, people have their spiritual eyes opened and come to acknowledge the evidence.

In the process, God makes himself known as One who is distinct from all the false gods. Jesus makes himself known as One who is the way and the truth (John 14:6), distinct from all other false ways and counterfeit truths. Not all religious commitments are “equal.”

Each one of us who has become a believer has made a transition from darkness to light. Each of us has *changed* the circle of belief. Somehow, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, we woke up to what was true all along, namely, that God the Father of Jesus Christ is the true God and there is no other. We rejected former religious commitments—commitment to a traditional form of false religion, or commitment to atheism or agnosticism, or commitment to the worship of money or pleasure, or some other modern form of ultimate allegiance. When we rejected former religious commitments, we did not become neutral in religion. We came to Christ. Without Christ and the working of his truth and his power, we never would have made the transition.

Religious neutrality is a mirage. It is a mirage that never existed in our life. And so why should we pretend in apologetics that it is an ideal that an unbeliever should emulate, or that we ourselves should temporarily emulate for the sake of dialogue? It is disloyalty to Christ to pretend that the desire for neutrality is a good thing. Once again, “whoever is not with me is against me” (Matt. 12:30).

The Centrality of the Bible in Human Living

The Bible’s picture of proper human living is radically different from the world’s picture, and the difference occurs already at a very basic level, namely, over the question of the independence of human thinking and the independence of human decision-making. Let us approach the question of independence by considering how the Bible describes the place that verbal communication from God plays in human living.

God created man “in the image of God,” according to Genesis 1:26–27. He did not create man to live in isolation, but to live in personal communion with God himself. We can appreciate this communion when we see the contrast between the situation before the fall of Adam into sin and the

situation afterward. Afterward, Adam and Eve tried to hide (Gen. 3:8–10). They were afraid to stand in God’s presence. God was “walking in the garden,” according to Genesis 3:8, so that if they had not sinned they could have walked with him.

One aspect of this personal communion between God and man is communication in language. Before the fall into sin, God instructed man concerning his role (Gen. 1:28–30) and his obligations with respect to the tree of knowledge (2:16–17). Immediately after the fall, God continued to speak to Adam and Eve (3:9–19). He gave words of judgment indicating some of the penalties for their sin. But he also gave a word of comfort: he promised to send the offspring of the woman to triumph over the serpent, that is, over Satan (3:15).

It is evident even from this early narrative that God intended his verbal communications with mankind to play a crucial role. Verbal communication was one aspect of personal communion between God and man. Through his words God also gave guidance and direction in both general and specific ways. At the general level, God indicated that human beings were to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). God also gave specific instructions about not eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:17). When he created man, God never intended that man should find his way in the world just by using his mind and observing the trees and the soil around him. God spoke. God instructed. And because it was God who spoke, he spoke with absolute authority, the authority of the Creator. This speech was designed to govern everything else in human life.

We see the same theme of the centrality of God’s instruction later on. God’s instruction was central for Noah, when God commanded Noah to build the ark (Gen. 6:13–22). It was central for Abram, when God commanded him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 12:1–4).

God’s word also played a central, guiding role in the life of Israel under Moses:

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the rules that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that *you may do them* in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by *keeping all his statutes and his commandments*, which I command you, all the days of your life, and *that your days may be long*. Hear therefore, O Israel, and *be careful to do them*, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as

the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. (Deut. 6:1–6)

The instructions of God must be continually on the lips of parents, in order that the children may learn:

You shall teach them [God’s words] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:7–9)

The responsibilities placed on Israel are similar to the responsibilities that a Christian disciple has in our day. The Christian disciple is never off duty. He is a disciple in all circumstances because Christ is his Master in all circumstances. Christ is Lord in all of life. Similarly, Israel was responsible for hearing and keeping God’s commandments in all circumstances: “when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut. 6:7). Discipleship involves listening to God’s instruction. And we are not only to listen, but to obey—to *keep* God’s commandments.

The same theme reoccurs with Joshua:

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to *do according to all the law* that Moses my servant commanded you. *Do not turn from it* to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be *careful to do according to all that is written* in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Josh. 1:7–8)

And we find it in Judges:

And you shall make no covenant with the inhabitants of this land; you shall break down their altars. But you have *not obeyed my voice*. (Judg. 2:2)

The northern kingdom of Israel was taken into exile because the people failed to listen to God's voice:

Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by *every prophet and every seer*, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and *keep my commandments and my statutes*, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets."

But *they would not listen*, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God. They *despised his statutes and his covenant* that he made with their fathers and *the warnings* that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had *commanded* them that they should not do like them. And they abandoned *all the commandments* of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger. Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only. (2 Kings 17:13–18)

The same happened to the southern kingdom:

The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by *his messengers*, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, *despising his words* and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy. (2 Chron. 36:15–16)

We hear the same theme from Jesus himself:

Everyone then who *hears these words of mine and does them* will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and *does not do them* will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matt. 7:24–27)

Jesus asks us pointedly to keep his commandments:

If you love me, you will *keep my commandments*. (John 14:15)

Some of the passages focus on God’s “commandments” and his “statutes.” But these commandments do not come as just an isolated list of rules, which would be independent of God. God speaks them. And he speaks them in contexts in which he gives himself to us and instructs us. Everything that God gives us in Scripture helps to guide how we understand the parts that contain specific commandments. All of God’s speech serves to guide us. In our day, we have a completed canon of Scripture. And all of that canon functions to guide us.

We considered earlier what it means to be a disciple of Christ. It means submitting to his teaching. And we find among his teachings affirmations of the divine authority of the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17–19; 19:4; John 10:35).² So we infer that we must receive the Old Testament as God’s Word and submit to its claims. Since the New Testament apostles are commissioned by Christ, they have his authority, and we submit to New Testament teaching as well.

In sum, God does not leave us to our own thoughts. He guides us by speaking to us. Today he speaks through the completed canon of Scripture. He intends that his words should have a central role in guiding the whole of life. God created human beings in the beginning with this process of verbal communication already in view. We were created by God to have continual communication with him. We falsify what we are as creatures when we attempt to just “work out the truth” independently.

The Disastrous Fruit of Independence

The Bible also includes some instances of human beings’ attempting the alternative strategy of working independently of God. The history of the alternative starts in the garden of Eden. Adam and Eve decided to make up their minds for themselves in their thinking about the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That step involved rebelling against God, ceasing to trust him, and rebelling against and despising the good words of direction that God gave. The history continued in the wilderness, where the people were determined to appoint a new leader instead of Moses and return to Egypt (Num. 14:3–4). Later they decided to go up on their own initiative and take the land from the Canaanites (14:40, 44). This kind

2. See John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), 1–54.

of behavior represents the desire to be *autonomous*, to make up one's own mind regardless of what God says.

The pattern continues in modern universities. With few exceptions, the overall atmosphere for university learning is an atmosphere of autonomy. That atmosphere is mostly assumed, rather than being discussed or questioned. Followers of Christ submit to his teaching. Most other people in the university setting prefer to submit to no one. They think that their approach is obviously right, and they despise genuine Christian faith. They think that Bible-believing Christians are naive or dogmatic or both.

Here we have a modern polarization between Christians, who submit to the teaching of God in the Bible, and non-Christians, who do not. This polarization echoes the polarization in Scripture itself between the desire for autonomy and the desire to serve God faithfully. Adam and Eve in their first sin desired autonomy. In the wilderness the Israelites in their desire for autonomy proposed to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt. By contrast, faithful saints listen to God's instruction.

It follows that modern universities are not religiously neutral, though they pretend to be. The atmosphere of autonomy represents a form of deep rebellion against God. Most participants in a university are committed to following their own way, and in so doing they are also committed to rejecting God's way.

But is the commitment of non-Christians really this bad? Some people might claim that non-Christians are merely ignorant of the truth, not actively committed to resisting God's way and God's instruction. It is true that some people on the face of the earth have never heard about the Bible or the description that the Bible gives of the true God, or the message of salvation in Christ that the Bible contains. But even these people are not neutral. According to Romans 1:18–23, they have general revelation and a knowledge of the true God. They suppress this knowledge.

But the participants in a modern university in the West are typically much worse off. They aspire to be educated. They aspire to search for truth or to search for a wise way to live. And unless their education is peculiarly defective, they will know at least bits—maybe highly distorted bits—about the nature of Christian faith and the Bible. And because of their commitment to autonomy, they have already determined to reject the transcendent claims that come from Christianity.

Someone might still want to argue in their favor, by pointing out that what they know is only a grievous distortion, and so they have an excuse. Yes, there are many distorted understandings. And here is where

questions about apologetics strategy begin. If the problem is only that they do not know what the Bible claims and what genuine Christians believe, communication from a Christian can take the form of a simple presentation of the gospel. What will be the reaction? God might use the gospel to draw a person to faith. The gospel has divine power (Rom. 1:16) and may overcome all objections.

But does a simple presentation of the gospel always lead to a response in faith? No. Why not? Often modern people are not even curious about the gospel. They are convinced secularists. They are already committed to another way of life. But even if they are curious, their curiosity is mixed with resistance. The gospel is not pleasing to people who are in rebellion against God and are determined to continue in rebellion (1 Cor. 1:18–31).

Questions of apologetics arise, then, when Christian proclamation meets resistance and objections. And the resistance and objections do not come from nowhere. They are energized not merely by the general love of autonomy, but often by pride and comfort that the individual participant at a university feels because of the alleged superiority of the principle of autonomy and the knowledge claims of the university. The alleged superiority of the university contrasts with the alleged ignorance and primitive thought of Bible-believing Christianity.

I focus on the university setting because the atmosphere of autonomy is so strong and so obvious. It is the basic assumption about how to conduct discussion about any point at issue. But of course the universities influence everything else. The powerful people in business, education, media, and politics are usually university-educated. So the polarization between Bible-believing Christians and nearly everyone else characterizes most portions of Western societies.

In all this, my point is that Christians and non-Christians do not think alike and do not make the same assumptions. They have different assumptions in particular about the role of the Bible and the role of “making up one’s own mind” and running one’s own life. The Bible itself contains many examples of the difference. We must reckon with this difference when we prepare for apologetic discussion.

Points for Apologetic Discussion

So how will we conduct an apologetic discussion with an unbeliever? Will we undertake to present evidence for the resurrection of Christ? Of course. But how will we do it? Will we do it without any attention to what

people think are the *standards* for evaluating evidence? Then we run the danger that unbelieving hearers will never analyze what might be mistaken in their idea of appropriate standards.

There is plenty of evidence for the resurrection, as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 15:3–8. But evidence gets interpreted against a background of assumptions. Paul interprets the evidence against the background of the Old Testament, as he indicates by the phrase “in accordance with the Scriptures,” twice repeated (1 Cor. 15:3–4). By contrast, a modern unbeliever might interpret the testimonies of 1 Corinthians 15:3–8 and elsewhere against a background that includes the assumption that science has shown that miracles are impossible. This assumption has a firm place in an unbeliever’s mind partly because the commitment to autonomy in thought contributes to a manner of thinking in which human insights become ultimate godlike claims rather than approximations. A regularity perceived by science is viewed as truth, rather than an approximation that might have exceptions because God can work exceptionally. So we are wise if we tackle the ways in which modern assumptions differ from the Christian view.

How else might we try to persuade an unbeliever? Will we present an argument for the existence of God, perhaps the argument for a first cause? Well, God is the first cause (Gen. 1:1). But how will an unbeliever understand such an argument? Typically, his commitment to autonomy leads him to treat all causes on a level. And that kind of understanding leads not to the God of the Bible, but to one more cause on the same level with the causes involving the interaction of two created things. One billiard ball hits another. Can we trace the causes of the billiard balls back into the past? Even if there is a first cause, it gets demoted by autonomous thinking to one cause among many. It is one billiard ball among many.

We need to challenge the underlying assumptions. Otherwise, the claims from the Bible tend to get distorted and rejected as they are filtered and misunderstood through the lens of antibiblical assumptions—a non-Christian worldview.

So we undertake to analyze the assumptions and commitments that belong to unbelief and that energize objections to the gospel. When we consider typical intellectual objections within the Western world, we find at least three vulnerabilities among these assumptions.

First, we find irony. Non-Christians think of Christian faith as ignorant and dogmatic. But ironically, they have ignorance and dogmatism of their own. The typical inhabitant of the university system looks down on Christianity in the midst of considerable ignorance concerning its actual

claims, and in the midst of massive ignorance about the roots of his own notions. He feels comfortable affirming autonomy and rejecting Christianity, not because he has analyzed or checked out his commitments, but because everyone around him has similar notions. He has just accepted an atmosphere. And he is ignorant that this is what has happened. Having accepted the atmosphere, he holds it dogmatically. He is afraid of losing social position if he asks prying questions about it. He is influenced by pride and by fear. His reactions display not only ignorance but sin.

Second, some people might have thought through autonomy and might reject Christian faith in a much more informed way. But they, too, have the foundations of their lives on sand. For example, they have no firm foundation for moral judgments. If God does not exist, moral standards evaporate into personal or social preferences. The attempt to pronounce judgments about the alleged ignorance and dogmatism of a Christian evaporates into the will to exercise power, according to which a person projects his subjective preferences onto others. Similarly, knowledge might evaporate into skepticism as a person wonders how he can know that his mental apparatus is properly in tune with the world. The moral standards for knowledge itself disappear, and with them standards for evaluating what claims to be knowledge.

Third, the non-Christian secretly depends on God and his good gifts, day by day, in issues of morality and knowledge and other spheres.

All three of these vulnerabilities represent possible starting points for apologetic discussion. Frame's book helps us forward in the process.

The Pervasiveness of General Revelation

Let us consider a bit more the third vulnerability, concerning secret dependence on God. A robust doctrine of general revelation helps apologetics because it enhances appreciation of human dependence on God and the human knowledge of God that unbelievers are engaged in suppressing. In his book *Introduction to Systematic Theology*,³ Cornelius Van Til took care to work out a robust appreciation of general revelation, before discussing special revelation and Scripture. He saw that our thinking about general revelation makes a difference. In particular, Romans 1:18–23 makes a difference, by its claim that creation reveals God and that human beings consequently know God.

3. Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007).

A non-Christian in the West typically assumes that reality consists in facts that do not clearly reveal God. If a Christian concedes this assumption, or if he *appears* to concede it by never challenging it, the special claims of Scripture soon lose plausibility. A divine voice in Scripture does not fit into a world where God is allegedly absent. The resurrection of Christ also loses plausibility. A special miraculous act in which God raises his Son from the dead makes no sense in a world of mere “facts,” where God is effectively absent. If the non-Christian gains the alleged “right” to interpret the world autonomously, he will also interpret Scripture autonomously, and conclude that it is merely human. He will interpret the resurrection autonomously, and conclude that it is a mythic story. Or even if he admits that it happened, it remains a strange exception without meaning. He might say, “Strange things sometimes happen. Who knows what they mean?” Suppression of general revelation, if conceded, leads to suppression of special revelation.

On the other hand, a robust understanding of general revelation helps to unveil ways in which the knowledge of God is suppressed in unbelief. Non-Christians depend on God and simultaneously corrupt their knowledge of God in their situation of dependence. Frame unpacks the dependencies.

In the providence of God I, too, have tried to make a contribution. My work has not focused primarily on the challenges involved in direct apologetic dialogue and confrontation with unbelievers; rather, I have focused on positive appreciation of the nature of general revelation. In the process, I have come to appreciate more deeply that every nook and cranny of science and scientific law, every nook and cranny of language, every bit of personal relationships, every piece in the area of logic—each testifies to its source in God, whom we continually meet.

God made human beings themselves for the purpose of enjoying his glory: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism Answer 1). The phrase in the original title of Frame’s book, *To the Glory of God*, is apt. We are called by God to praise his glory as he reveals himself through science and language and relationships and so on. In general revelation as well as in special revelation, God the Father reveals his glorious character through the radiance of God the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. We were created to perceive and receive this glory. We depend on him at every point. And if, when we look around us, we evade and suppress this revelation, we deny not only the reality concerning what we see, but our own selves.

Discipleship Again

We return to the beginning. What is needed is discipleship to Christ. Of course we need to be calling to discipleship those who are caught in the prison of unbelief and darkness. But we also need to grow as disciples ourselves. Serious discipleship leads to understanding God and the world. And understanding bears fruit in apologetics. Every piece of food and every moral issue are potential starting points for apologetic discussion, because every apple testifies to its source in God. In the end, Frame's book expounds discipleship in the arena of apologetics. To do so is also to expound the glory of God—it is to write apologetics to the glory of God.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I am delighted to see this new edition of my book. It is an anniversary celebration; the original book was published in 1994, and this one now appears twenty years later. During that period I have done more writing in apologetics, and I am very thankful to the editor, Joe Torres, for adding that material to this book, with his own editorial notes. Joe has been a good friend and correspondent for maybe ten years, has worked with me as a teaching and research assistant, and who understands my apologetic approach as well as anyone else in the world.

Another who shares this level of understanding is my longtime friend and colleague Vern Poythress. Many thanks to Vern for his illuminating Foreword to this book. He introduces the apologetic issues by a careful account of the biblical history of redemption. I hope the reader will conclude that everything in the book is rooted in the Bible's account of creation, fall, and salvation through Jesus Christ.

Besides Joe and Vern, I would like to thank all of those who have worked to bring out this second edition of my book. John J. Hughes, as in many previous books of mine, has managed the publishing process. Karen Magnuson has done here an excellent job in copyediting. Tim Muether has developed the indices. And we all agree that without God's grace we could do nothing.

My prayer for this book is that it will motivate believers to take the gospel to the streets, even to the world, without fear. Among Christian apologists there are "not many . . . [who] were wise according to worldly standards" (1 Cor. 1:26), but those worldly standards themselves are foolishness in God's estimation. So we should expect apologists faithful to the Lord to "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). May God use this book to help believers to present the gospel with such power.

John Frame

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

As the title indicates, this book is an “introduction” rather than a comprehensive system of apologetics. But 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*.¹ That is a somewhat larger study, presenting the general theory of knowledge that 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. Although I will refer to Van Til from time to time, however, it will not be my goal in this book to explain Van Til or to show the precise 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.)² That book will show more adequately than I can here why I continue to follow, and occasionally depart from, the Van Tillian model.

I 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.

1. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987.

2. This book was published as *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995).

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 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. (Yet 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 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.³

But 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.⁴ Van Til always said that there was an "absolutely certain argument"

3. This paragraph has been added to the original preface to clarify the term *presuppositional*.

4. I 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

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 10 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 10 helpful, and I 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 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.

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 that, the arguer claims, imply a conclusion. So understood, the term is roughly synonymous with *reasoning*, which, for example, 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 “Dangers” in chapter 1). 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.

INTRODUCTION

Why release a second edition of John Frame's *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (hereafter *AGG*)? *AGG* has served as an introduction to Christian apologetics from a presuppositional or "Van Tillian" perspective for twenty years. So it would appear that the book had a good run and that it's time to look to other resources to instruct budding apologists. It's been available for two decades. Isn't that enough? Truth be told, this rerelease of *AGG* is long overdue. The card-carrying *Framean* thinker that I am, I suggest three reasons why: *AGG*'s biblical perspective on the discipline of apologetics, the constant need to clarify what Van Tillian (or presuppositional) apologetics really is (and is not), and a new generation of readers.

A Biblical Perspective on Apologetics

Like any other discipline, apologetics lacks a uniform definition. The standard that's largely been adopted is "the defense of the faith," but overlapping definitions abound. Apologetics has been defined as "that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith,"¹ "developing one's authentic self so as to present one's faith as helpfully as possible to one's neighbor,"² the demonstration "that Christianity is reasonable and thus (a) to assure Christians that their faith is not idiotic and (b) to clear away the obstacles and objections that keep nonbelievers from considering the arguments and evidence for the truth of Christianity,"³ "the discipline that deals with a rational

1. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 15.

2. John G. Stackhouse Jr., *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xvii.

3. James W. Sire, "On Being a Fool for Christ and an Idiot for Nobody," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 110–11.

defense of Christian faith,”⁴ “the task of defending and commending the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ in a Christlike, context-sensitive and audience-specific manner,”⁵ and finally “the business of engaging the worldviews of the day intelligently and thus bearing witness to Christ with credibility.”⁶ Of course, each of these definitions of apologetics is helpful. As Frame reminds us, a word can have more than one useful definition. And Frame himself presents two complementary definitions. In *DKG* he argued that apologetics is little more than *the application of Scripture to unbelief*,⁷ and on the first page of the first edition of *AGG* he defined apologetics as “the discipline that teaches Christians how to give a reason for their hope.” These definitions are simultaneously simple and profound. Their simplicity provides an umbrella to cover all branches of Christian apologetics. Let’s elaborate on this profundity.

Apologetics is giving a reason for our hope. This definition jumps right off the page from the charter verse of Christian apologetics (1 Peter 3:15). Apologetics is simply obedience to the command of Peter—no more, no less. When we define apologetics in terms of obedience, Scripture maintains its unique status as the final court of apologetic appeal. But apologetics is also *application of Scripture to unbelief*. The unregenerate heart desires a god that it can handle with a revelation that it finds palatable. The Christian defender is not free to water down the faith to suit the tastes of rebels. The unbeliever may be without excuse with regard to God’s existence and moral requirements (Rom. 1:18–32), but the apologist is likewise without excuse with regard to the truth that he or she must uphold and defend. God has revealed himself and requires his people to serve as kingdom heralds. A proper grasp of Scripture, its teachings, and their interconnections is paramount to its robust and God-glorifying application to unbelief.

Finally, apologetics is also application of Scripture *to unbelief*. Unbelief is no respecter of persons. Both Christians and non-Christians wrestle with doubt and suspicion. A biblical apologetic targets unbelief wherever it may be found, strengthening the faith of Christians and calling unbelievers to repentance and faith in Christ.

4. Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 37.

5. James K. Beilby, *Thinking about Christian Apologetics: What It Is and Why We Do It* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 30.

6. Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 29.

7. *DKG*, 87.

The Constant Need for Clarification

While Frame’s definition of apologetics is clear enough, his methodology hasn’t always been properly grasped. Misunderstandings of Reformed apologetics linger. Many of the most basic tenets of a presuppositional apologetic are misunderstood, caricatured, dismissed, or maligned. In March 2012, Paul Copan contributed an article on the blog of the Gospel Coalition titled “Questioning Presuppositionalism,” in which he shared several concerns. His objections, in his own words, are as follows:

- First, it engages in question-begging—assuming what one wants to prove.
- Second, Christians share common ground with unbelievers, who are likewise made in God’s image, which is not erased by the fall.
- Third, some (not all) presuppositionalists seem inconsistent about natural theology.
- Fourth, it is important to distinguish between the confident ground of our knowledge of God and the highly probable public case for the Christian faith.⁸

Unfortunately, all of Copan’s concerns were based on easily avoidable misunderstandings. While responses to his concerns are parceled out throughout this second edition of *AGG*, a quick response to the first two objections might be handy.⁹ First, not all circularity is created equal. Presuppositionalists admit to a kind of circularity, but reject others. In these pages you will find Frame’s expanded and revised discussion of circularity as well as Appendix D, “Between Scylla and Charybdis: Presuppositionalism, Circular Reasoning, and the Charge of Fideism,” which I wrote in response to this objection. Second, no Van Tillian to my knowledge has ever claimed that the *imago Dei* was lost in the fall. To the contrary, twenty years ago—in the first edition of *AGG*—Frame stated that “Orthodox Calvinists . . . recall that God made man in his image—an image that is marred by sin, but not destroyed. [Cornelius] Van Til argues that part of that image is knowledge of God, which, though repressed (Rom. 1), still exists at some level of his

8. Paul Copan, “Questioning Presuppositionalism” (March 12, 2012), <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2012/03/12/questioning-presuppositionalism/>.

9. For my own response to Copan’s piece, see “Presuppositionalism and Circularity . . . Again?” (March 15, 2012), <http://apolojet.wordpress.com/2012/03/15/presuppositionalism-and-circularity-again/>.

thinking. That is the point of contact to which the apologist appeals.”¹⁰ My prayer for this second edition is that God will use it to help to foster both genuine understanding of presuppositionalism and, following from this understanding, forward-moving dialogue with those brothers and sisters in Christ who do not accept its distinctive emphases.

A New Audience

Both the rise of Reformed theology among younger evangelicals and the renewed interest of “gospel-centeredness” have rightly placed a high emphasis on Scripture. With this focus, people are looking to know what the Bible says on everything from gay marriage, questions of medical ethics, parenting, and unifying themes of Scripture to how to present and defend Christianity against its cultured (and uncultured) despisers. Young, Restless, and Reformed Christians want to know what Scripture says about apologetics and epistemology. Without the least hint of self-serving arrogance, it can be said that the Reformed tradition has been known for its intellectual prowess. Often this has been a boon for the movement, but not too infrequently it has sucked the vitality out of many a living faith. The sinful heart knows all too well how to distort any good thing. But under the instruction of Scripture, a humble recognition of man’s fallibility and moral frailty, and the rigors that come from combining the two to meet the challenges of unbelief, what do we get? My answer: you get the essential tenets of Frame’s approach to apologetics. If adherents to the New Calvinist movement are looking for a seasoned guide to direct their journey for an apologetic that magnifies the sovereignty and the glory of God, they have to look no further than John Frame.

About This Edition

A word about the expansions in this twentieth-anniversary edition is in order. Numerous editorial decisions were made to make a great book even better. Here I should mention my sources. This work includes the integration of both previously published and unpublished material. As an introduction, the original *AGG* sketched the general contours of Frame’s approach to apologetics. Such an overview brings with it a challenge—namely, the occasional lack of specificity. A paradigmatic example will help here: In *AGG* Frame argues against Van Til’s contention that

10. *AGG*, 83.

transcendental arguments are necessarily distinct from arguments of a more traditional kind. Some justification is made in *AGG*, but a fuller argument is found elsewhere (*CVT*, *STL*). The second edition includes these expansions. Sections from *DG* on miracle, evolution, and the problem of evil have also been integrated into the relevant units of this expanded work. John was also gracious enough to provide unpublished material for this project, providing helpful nuance and further clarifications on his original formulations.¹¹

The inclusion of new content also required some shifting around of material. Some originally relegated to a footnote has been elevated to the main text, and on the rare occasion that the inclusion of material altered the flow of an argument, material originally found in the main text has been moved to a footnote. Chapter 7 (the first of two on the problem of evil) has been restructured to fit with Frame's perspectival approach offered first in *DG* and then again in *ST*. Another feature of this edition is the inclusion of annotations. The bulk of Frame's literary output was produced in the days following *AGG*. This material includes detailed discussions on a variety of topics, such as ethics, apologetics, the doctrines of God and revelation, and philosophy. Some of his formulations have been revised, expanded, or clarified in this edition. It would serve readers well to see how Frame's approach to apologetics is not only the application of Scripture to unbelief, but also the outworking of his overall biblically informed worldview. So cross-references to fuller discussions of related issues in his other works have been included here. Frame's discussion on miracles and their apologetic value (taken from *DG*) has also been included in order to make the book more comprehensive. Appendix C is a real online correspondence with an atheist. Unlike the fictional—and therefore idealized—dialogue provided by Frame in chapter 10, this discussion takes steps both backward and forward. Overall, I am convinced that it is helpful to provide an example of *one possible way* to apply the material found in this book. Unless noted otherwise, all biblical quotations in the main body of this new edition have been updated to the *ESV*.

Finally, this work is unique not only in that it updates, revises, and expands original material, but also in that I have provided a running commentary throughout the footnotes. My goal was to highlight the

11. Some of this material is found in Frame's contributions to Steven B. Cowan, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), and Gavin McGrath, W. C. Campbell-Jack, and C. Stephen Evans, eds., *The New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

subtlety of Frame's approach when needed. Sometimes he reformulates a traditional argument without saying so, and the reader may risk missing the subtlety of his thought. I've also included a few summarizing charts to aid student comprehension. References to Cornelius Van Til's *Defense of the Faith* and *Introduction to Systematic Theology* have been updated to match the most recent editions of those works, except in the appendices.¹²

There are many to thank for their encouragement on this project. Sarah Flashing (writer and speaker at sarahflashing.com) was my cheerleader from the initial stages of this project to the very end. This newer edition might never have gotten off the ground without her helpful feedback and suggestions. My brother David has been my sounding board for years on all things philosophical and apologetic. He's always pressed me to move beyond the simple recitation of material to critical analysis. A heartfelt thanks to Dr. James Anderson, Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina. James graciously agreed to review the manuscript and to critically interact with it. His suggestions and analysis have certainly improved this book and helped to catch many defects to which I was previously blind. I take full responsibility for those that remain! A special word of thanks is due to my wife, Jessica. This past year has thrown quite a bit at us both, the greatest challenge (and blessing!) of which was the birth of our first child, Jenesis Eden Torres. The responsibilities that come along with parenthood are great, but God's grace toward us during this time has been even greater. This year, Jessica has become my hero all over again. She balances the multiple responsibilities that come along with marriage and motherhood in a way that evidences God's grace and frankly boggles my mind. She's been the guardian of my writing and editing schedule, and truly is my Barnabas (in this case, *daughter* of encouragement).

Finally, a special word of thanks is due to John Frame. His committing this project to my care has been both an honor that words can hardly express and daunting beyond belief. But with that trust comes a relationship. Over the course of a decade, John has challenged and encouraged me to think God's thoughts after him. I am not only thankful for Frame

12. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008); Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrine of Revelation, Scripture, and God*, ed. William Edgar, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007).

the academician, but also thankful to God for John the redeemed sinner and godly saint. I had the privilege not only of studying and working with him but also of worshiping alongside him at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Oviedo, Florida. He is a devoted churchman, a loving father and husband, and a godly example of Christlike humility. I am a better man for knowing him.

Joseph E. Torres
Thanksgiving 2013

ABBREVIATIONS

AGG	John M. Frame, <i>Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994)
CVT	John M. Frame, <i>Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995)
DCL	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Christian Life</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008)
DG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002)
DKG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987)
DWG	John M. Frame, <i>The Doctrine of the Word of God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010)
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NOG	John M. Frame, <i>No Other God</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001)
ST	John M. Frame, <i>Systematic Theology</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013)
STL	John J. Hughes, ed., <i>Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009)
TAG	Transcendental argument for the existence of God
TANG	Transcendental argument for the nonexistence of God

APOLOGETICS: THE BASICS

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

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

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

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

1. In *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 Scripture.” The definition given in the present volume arises from 1 Peter 3:15–16 and focuses on the person of the apologist rather than on 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 will see. (Notice, by the way, how a word may have more than one useful definition.)

14:11; 20:24–31; 1 Cor. 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

2. *Apologetics as defense*: answering the objections of unbelief. Paul describes his mission as “defending and confirming the gospel” (Phil. 1:7 NIV; 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 of unbelieving thought (Ps. 14:1; 1 Cor. 1:18–2:16). In view of the importance of number 2, it is not surprising that some will define apologetics as “the defense of the faith.”³ 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 destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Non-Christian thinking is “folly” (ESV), or “foolishness” (NIV), 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.⁴ 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 on) 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 2.⁵ 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 that complement and strengthen one another. For example, an argument for the existence of God (perspective no. 1) that

2. Note what the father of a demon-possessed child says to Jesus: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

3. For Cornelius Van Til’s major exposition of his apologetics, see K. Scott Oliphint, ed., *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008). But his apologetics is certainly less “defensive” and more “offensive” than most others.

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

5. So 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.

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.⁶

Presuppositions

Our theme verse, 1 Peter 3:15, begins by telling us, "In your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy." The apologist must be a believer in Christ, committed to the lordship of Christ (cf. Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11).⁷ Once we have made the distinction between God's Word and the imaginations of our own hearts (Gen. 6:5), God calls us to live according to the former. God's Word is true (therefore dependable), though every human authority may lie (Rom. 3:4). If we adopt the Word of God as our ultimate commitment, our ultimate standard, our ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, God's Word then becomes our "presupposition." That is to say, since we use it to evaluate all other beliefs, we must regard it as more certain than any other beliefs.

Noah had no empirical evidence that the world would be destroyed by a flood, only the evidence of the word of God; but by grace he believed God (Gen. 6:8, 22; Heb. 11:7). Others heard that word, but rejected it (2 Peter 2:5), doubtless often with laughter. Abraham believed God, even though the apparent empirical evidence contradicted God's word. God said that he and Sarah would have a son, even though both were well into old age (Gen. 18:10–15). Sarah laughed, but Paul commends Abraham's unwavering faith in God's word despite the temptation to disbelieve (Rom. 4:20ff.).

The New Testament commends those who believe even without empirical signs (John 20:29), and it condemns those who refuse to believe without such signs (Matt. 12:39; 16:1ff.; 1 Cor. 1:22). There is a difference between walking by faith and walking by sight (2 Cor. 5:7; Heb. 11). The world says, "Seeing is believing"; Jesus says, "If you believed you would see the glory of

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

7. *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 on the full implications of Jesus' lordship.

God” (John 11:40). Our apologetic approach is firmly rooted in our commitment to Christ’s covenant lordship.⁸ 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.⁹

This argument might 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,¹⁰ because it claims many advocates down through church history, particularly the second-century apologists (Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Aristides), the great thirteenth-century thinker Thomas Aquinas and his many followers down to the present day, Joseph Butler (d. 1752) and his followers, and indeed the great majority of apologists in our own time.

8. See *DKG*, 1–49, esp. 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.

9. On the role of natural revelation, see the section “*Sola Scriptura* and Natural Revelation” later in this chapter.

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

In saying that traditional apologists espouse “neutrality,” I am not arguing that they seek to put their Christian commitment aside in doing apologetics.¹¹ 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. But does this kind of “neutrality” exist? No. Paul asks, “What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?” (2 Cor. 6:14ff.). We are either for Christ or against him; no one is unbiased (Matt. 12:30).

Through the history of apologetics, it has been common for Christians to claim some kind of neutral ground, some criteria or standards that both believer and unbeliever can accept without compromising their systems.¹²

11. My friend R. C. Sproul, in correspondence, insists that the classical tradition, 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.) In this connection, however, 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 (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1. Q3. A2). Further, he (unlike Sproul, interestingly) had very little practical awareness of the effects of sin on 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 neither pro- nor anti-Christian, but neutral. As for Sproul himself, I have nothing critical to say about his exposition of the effects of sin on unbelieving reasoning in Romans 1. He clearly denies the neutrality of unbelieving thought (see *Classical Apologetics*, 39–63). Thus, he recognizes that the apologetic encounter 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 pages 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 that these gentlemen have written independently, I would guess that the treatment of Romans 1 is the work of Sproul and the discussion on pages 231–40 is the work of Gerstner. I 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.

12. Here are two frequently cited examples: “Bring on your revelations, let them make peace with the law of contradiction and the facts of history and they will deserve a rational man’s assent,” and “Let reason be kept to: and, if any part of the Scripture account of the redemption of the world by Christ can be shown to be really contrary to it, let the scripture, in the name

There are, of course, usually some propositions that both believer and unbeliever can agree to. And those kinds of agreements are apologetically useful. Indeed, as we indicated earlier, some unbelievers, like the devils, might even confess that Jesus is the Son of the Most High God. But we mislead the unbeliever if we tell him that we are using the same standards of truth, rationality, and knowledge as he. To tell him this is misleading even if he is willing to do lip service to scriptural standards. For his grand passion, his basic commitment, is to attack and undermine the truth as the Christian understands it.

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 "honor Christ the Lord as holy," 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 (1 Peter 3:13–14). 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. 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 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

of God be given up." The first quote is from Edward J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 178. The second is taken from Bishop Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1898), 5.

human life. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 we read, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to 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 on us is comprehensive. In all that we do, we must seek to please him. No area of human life is neutral.¹³

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. 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.¹⁴ 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 esp. 2:14]; 2 Cor. 4:4). Thus, the non-Christian is deceived and “led astray” (Titus 3:3). He knows God (Rom. 1:21) and does not know him at the same time (1 Cor. 1:21;

13. This 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 Deuteronomy 6:6ff. after the challenge to love God exclusively). For many of us, such considerations mandate homeschooling 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: “No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

14. Some have tried to stress the past (aorist) form of “know” in Romans 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 chapter 1 he shows us that even without access to the written law, Gentiles are guilty of sin before God (chapter 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 1:21–32. But he clearly does not regard the events of verses 21–32 merely as past history. He is clearly using this history to describe the present condition of Gentiles before God. Therefore, the aorist *gnontes* should not be pressed to indicate past time exclusively. As the suppression continues, so does the knowledge that renders the suppression culpable.

2:14).¹⁵ 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.

But this means not only that the *apologist* must “honor Christ the Lord as holy,” but also that his *argument* must presuppose that lordship. Our argument must be an exhibition 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.¹⁶

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*. There is no neutrality. Our witness is either God’s wisdom or the world’s foolishness. There is nothing in between. Even if neutrality were possible, that route would be forbidden to us.

When I oppose neutrality, what I oppose is appealing to something other than God’s revelation as the *ultimate* standard of truth. It’s certainly permissible to appeal to the dictionary as a standard of linguistic usage, or to the U.S. Constitution as a standard for American law. To do this is not to appeal to an ultimate standard. So, similarly, we can agree with unbelievers on certain things: the sky is blue, $2 + 2 = 4$, the Red Sox won the World Series. In one sense, this is common ground, but it is not neutrality in the above

15. Obviously, there is some complexity here that requires further explanation. Different kinds of knowledge are 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.

16. This is absolutely fundamental to a Reformed apologetic. The same God-breathed Scripture that informs us of sin, Satan, and the Savior equally speaks with unique authority in regard to the ethics of knowledge and our approach to apologetics.

sense. I think it's perfectly acceptable to start with present areas of agreement and work on from there. In one sense, there are all kinds of agreements, beginning with "the sky is blue." Neutrality is not agreeing on matters like that, but agreement on such things as worldview and epistemology. Agreeing that the sky is blue can push you either to deeper disagreements or to deeper agreements brought about by the work of the Spirit.

These propositions held in common can have apologetic value: If we can agree that the sky is blue, for example, how is it that such agreement is possible? If the world is a world of chance, how could anybody agree on anything? Agreement presupposes a world made by God, designed to be orderly and designed to be known by rational minds. You can see that this kind of argument is presuppositional. It's appealing to the true knowledge of God that the unbeliever has but suppresses (Rom. 1)—a knowledge that he has in common with the believer. To argue this way is very different from saying, "Let's assume that the Bible can be false, and let's judge its truth on the higher authority of our senses and logic."

Now for a further bit of nuance. Cornelius Van Til uses the term *presupposition* to indicate the role that divine revelation ought to play in human thought. I don't believe that he ever defines the term. I define it for him as a "basic heart-commitment." For the Christian, that commitment is to God as revealed in his Word. While we maintain our ultimate commitment, we cannot accept as true or right anything that conflicts with that commitment. And yet in a few instances in Van Til's writings, he uses the term differently. For example, he urges the apologist to show "the non-Christian that even in his virtual negation of God, he is still really presupposing God."¹⁷ Clearly, when the unbeliever presupposes God in this sense, he is not acknowledging God as his ultimate commitment. Van Til's point here is that in assuming the intelligibility of the world, the unbeliever implicitly concedes the existence of the God that he explicitly denies. This lesser sense of *presuppose* is related to Van Til's more common use of the term, but it is somewhat different. For the unbeliever to presuppose God in this context is for him to think, say, or do something, contrary to his own inclination, that indicates at some level of his consciousness a recognition of God's reality and significance.

There are also passages in Van Til and other works by presuppositionalists in which the word *presuppose* is predicated not of persons, but

17. Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 13.

of things: arguments, methods, knowledge, academic disciplines, states of affairs (such as the intelligibility of the universe). In such contexts, the word can be taken to mean “necessary condition,” or “that which legitimizes.” Perhaps we may relate these uses to our basic definition by saying that if some thing X presupposes Y, then Y is that to which a person must be committed if the person is to give an intelligible account of X. Finally, there is the phrase *reasoning by presupposition*, which for Van Til designates the “transcendental argument” for Christian theism. We will discuss this form of argumentation further in chapter 4. We need to keep these distinctions in mind if we’re going to get our footing in understanding how presuppositionalists speak.

Circular Argument?

Does this mean that we are called to embrace circular argument? Only in one sense. We are not called to use arguments such as this: “The Bible is true; therefore, the Bible is true.” One can certainly say that there is a kind of circularity in presuppositional apologetics, but the circularity is neither vicious nor fallacious. It sounds circular to say that our faith governs our reasoning and also that it is in turn based on rationality. But it is important to remember that the rationality of which we speak, the rationality that serves as the rational basis for faith, is God’s own rationality. The sequence is as follows: God’s rationality → human faith → human reasoning. The arrows may be read “is the rational basis for.” So in this sense, the sequence is linear, not circular.

But if faith is in accord with God’s own thought, then it goes without saying that it will also be in accord with the best human reasoning, which images God’s. God gave us our rational equipment not to deceive us, but so that we might gain knowledge. Apart from sin, we may trust it to lead us into the truth; and even to sinners, the facts of God’s creation bear clear witness of him to the human mind (Rom. 1:20).

In biblical argument, therefore, there is both reasoning and evidence: the clear revelation that God has given of himself in the created world. So it is both right and proper to use evidences and human logic to confirm faith. Scripture does this very thing, frequently calling on people to look at the evidences of the truth (Ps. 19:1; Luke 1:1–4; John 20:30–31; Acts 1:1–3; 26:26; Rom. 1:19–20). Biblical religion is unique in its appeal to history as the locus of divine revelation. God has plainly revealed himself both in nature and in historical events. So it is quite legitimate, as we will 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:

- Premise 1: If Jesus' postresurrection appearances are well attested, then the resurrection is a fact.
- Premise 2: His postresurrection appearances are well attested.
- Conclusion: 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 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.¹⁸

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 Qur'an, human reason, sensation, or whatever, one must use criteria compatible with that conclusion. If that is circularity, then everybody is guilty of circularity.¹⁹

18. This 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.

19. Granted 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."

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

Certainly not, for several reasons.

1. *At one level, the unbeliever already knows the truth.* 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 that we haven't discussed."

2. *Our witness to the unbeliever never comes alone.* In the second place, 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 commonsense suppositions.

3. *We all already do this.* In the third place, this is in fact what we do in similar cases that are not normally considered religious. Imagine 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 not everyone is 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.²⁰

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

4. *We never run out of topics for discussion.* 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? And so on. 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 12:16–21). Van Til advocated a frank and explicit comparison of the competing worldviews. How might this interaction with a non-Christian look when we are bound to speak from Christian presuppositions? In very general terms, it goes like this:

20. This foreshadows some of the discussion of point of contact in chapter 4. The unbeliever lives in God's world and has this knowledge divinely implanted into the fabric of his humanity.

BELIEVER: The gospel is true because X, Y, Z.

UNBELIEVER: But your argument presupposes the truth of Scripture.

BELIEVER: Yes, but everyone presupposes something. You presuppose the autonomy of human reason.

UNBELIEVER: But how can you argue the truth of Scripture by appealing to Scripture? That's circular.

BELIEVER: No more circular than appealing to reason to prove reason.

UNBELIEVER: Well, then, you have your presupposition and I have mine. Does that mean that we cannot reason together at all?

BELIEVER: No, there is still a lot that we can talk about. Let's put your presupposition on the table, with your arguments, and I'll do the same with mine. We can compare the two. I think I can show that your argument "deconstructs"—that is, that it cannot even work within your own presuppositional framework.

UNBELIEVER: Good! Show me how you do that.

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 spokespersons, and the many forms that a biblical apologetic can take.

5. *Not all circularity is created equal.* In the fifth place, I have, in *DKG* 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 might itself be a way of saying, "The Bible is the Word of God because it says it is." I agree with any nonpresuppositionalist that this narrowly circular argument is not an apologetic claim in a serious sense. In fact, it acts as a contrast to those arguments that I believe have real apologetic value. But is there *no* truth at all in the narrowly circular argument? Let us formulate the argument a bit more formally:

- Premise 1: Whatever the Bible says is true.
- Premise 2: The Bible says that it is the Word of God.
- Conclusion: Therefore, the Bible is the Word of God.

Both premises are true from an evangelical viewpoint, and they do validly imply the conclusion. So the conclusion is true *because* the two premises are true. We believe that the Bible is the Word of God because it says that

it is the Word of God. A profound truth is 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.²¹

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 all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). But in Calvinism there is at least an equal emphasis on 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 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, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”

21. God controls and directs all of creation; therefore, all facts are on the side of the apologist. For more observations on this circularity, see *CVT*, 299–309.

(v. 13). You see that typically God’s sovereignty does not exclude, but engages human responsibility.²² 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 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. Yet 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*, and the like.

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.²³ As the earth was made by Spirit and word together (Gen. 1:2–3; Ps. 33:6 [“breath” = Spirit]), so God re-creates

22. These points have many important applications apart from apologetics, such as the following: (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. For further discussion, see *DCL*, chaps. 37, 40. 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.”

23. We 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 as regeneration without faith; others would describe it as a regeneration producing faith

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).²⁴ 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, 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 ready

in "seed form," that is, a disposition to hear and obey a word of God that as yet the person is unable to understand.

24. See also Appendix Q, "The Spirit and the Scriptures," in *DWG*, 615–39.

in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (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 can happen unintentionally even when an apologist seeks to be presuppositional. But when apologetics is consistently presuppositional—that is, 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, must be Scripture and Scripture alone. As Westminster Confession of Faith 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 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.²⁵ 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.

25. See *DKG*, 76–88, 93–98. Despite its focus on human need, this definition does full justice to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. *Sola scriptura* does not require that human needs be ignored in theology, only that Scripture have the final say about the answers to those needs (and about the propriety of the questions presented).

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.²⁶ But this is not necessarily the case. When I say, “There is design in the world; therefore, God exists,” I might in fact be getting the premise from Scripture itself! (Surely Scripture teaches that there is design in the world!) In addressing the unbeliever, I might be addressing the knowledge that, according to Romans 1:18ff., he has obtained from creation. Indeed, when I say that, I could 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, for example, Josephus.²⁷ 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

26. For example, in *Defense of the Faith*, 336, Van Til 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 might very well advance such an argument because of his conviction that cause and purpose are not at all intelligible without God. Indeed, if 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 nothing 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 explore more examples of this sort in *CVT*.

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

than, say, Luke. It is rather that even the non-Christian Josephus at points recognized the facts that Scripture records.²⁸ 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 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 such as 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 such as Josephus) and 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.²⁹

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.

28. John Calvin taught that reason confirms (or corroborates) the truth of Scripture. Christian faith, according to Calvin, demands no rational argumentation for its final support (grounding this conviction in the internal witness of the Holy Spirit); nevertheless, he claimed that Christian faith provides a "knowledge with which the best reason agrees." See his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.6.5.

29. Note 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; 20:31; Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:19–21).

***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 that 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 (1:32) and his wrath against sin (same verse; cf. v. 18). But 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 unfallen 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 might 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.³⁰

30. This passage is instructive for understanding an essential point of tension between presuppositionalism and apologetic methods that advocate natural theology. Paul’s discussion in Romans 1 is familiar territory for apologists whose approach closely aligns with natural theology. Yet Paul’s teaching in this passage undermines any notion that arguments can be derived exclusively from general revelation that would act as a stepping-stone to biblical faith. This is primarily because Romans 1 explicitly teaches that—apart from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit—even the evidence presented by God himself (“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because *God has shown it to them*,” v. 19) is twisted, perverted, and suppressed in the service of idolatry. This is not to say that the content of natural-theology arguments is false (i.e., that God is the final origin of causation, design, and ethics), only that in order for them to operate in a biblical manner, and to their fullest potential, they must be interpreted by Scripture.

Thus, God has given us Scripture, or *special revelation*,³¹ 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.³²

To allow Scripture this corrective work, we must accept the principle that our settled belief³³ as to Scripture’s teaching must take precedence over what we would believe from natural revelation alone.³⁴ God gave Scripture as the covenant 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

31. *Special revelation* in Reformed theology includes special utterances of God’s voice (as in Exodus 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. See, e.g., *DWG*, 330–31. But the traditional twofold distinction will have to do for now.

32. Granted, our interpretations of Scripture also need to be corrected at times. But this is the proper order: 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 upon reflection to be justified by the scriptural text itself. So Scripture has a primacy over all else. See *DKG*, pt. 2, “The Justification of Knowledge.”

33. The 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. Cf. *DKG*, 152–53, on cognitive rest.

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

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.³⁵ 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 each other. 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.

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.³⁶

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

36. Some have asked, “If nature and Scripture may never be understood apart from each other, 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 Romans 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.

Such a presentation of the Word, then, may include many sorts of arguments and evidences. Presuppositionalists are often accused of rejecting the use of evidence. This simply is not so.³⁷ 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 principle, presuppositionalists have a higher view of evidence than some evidentialists do. In presuppositionalism, evidence is not a merely probable witness to the truth of Christianity; rather, it is sure and certain. God's normative interpretation of it is the *only* rational interpretation of it.³⁸ Therefore, presuppositionalism does not involve any general prejudice against the use of extrabiblical data; such prejudice is impossible in any apologetic that seeks to address current issues. We do not reject the use of evidences, even the use of theistic proofs. We only insist that these be *scriptural* arguments—that is, arguments that appeal to scriptural criteria.³⁹ 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

37. Even in otherwise astute and learned books, Van Til is all too frequently misrepresented in this regard. As a recent example, on page 288 of *Can You Believe It's True? Christian Apologetics in a Modern and Postmodern Era* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), John S. Feinberg claims that Van Til (and many of his disciples) commends the faith “without offering any evidential support for it.” Contrary to these claims, we have the words of Van Til himself: “I would therefore engage in historical apologetics. (I do not personally do a great deal of this because my colleagues in the other departments of the Seminary in which I teach are doing it better than I could do it.) *Every bit of historical investigation, whether it be in the directly Biblical field, archaeology, or in general history, is bound to confirm the truth of the claims of the Christian position.* But I would not talk endlessly about facts and more facts without ever challenging the non-believer's philosophy of fact. A really fruitful historical apologetic argues that every fact is and must be such as proves the truth of the Christian theistic position.” Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 257 (emphasis added).

38. Presuppositionalists should have a uniquely high view of the use of evidences in Christian apologetics. A robust doctrine of both creation and providence demand it. Despite the inversion of man's sinful heart and futility to which creation has been subjected (Rom. 8), neither can ultimately perjure itself in its ongoing witness to God. *Everything* testifies to the truth of Christianity: the beauty and brokenness of creation, the blessedness and wretchedness of humanity, the flow and flux of history—all point to the truth of Scripture's portrait of God, mankind, and the world around us.

39. See my *DKG*, 140–49, 352–54; Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961). Van Til approves of theistic arguments in many places: see his *Defense of the Faith*, 197–98, 255; *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 179–80, 197, 314; *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 292; *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 179ff., 190ff. For a contemporary defense of presuppositionalism against the twin charges of fideism and fallacious circular reasoning, see Appendix D, “Between Scylla and Charybdis: Presuppositionalism, Circular Reasoning, and the Charge of Fideism Revisited.”

and without allowing the use of non-Christian criteria of truth.⁴⁰ 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 *DKG*) 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.⁴¹

Granted this approach, there need be no competition between 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.

40. The greatest difference between the traditional approach to apologetics and presuppositionalism is over epistemic neutrality. Van Til’s critics often fault his method with question-begging and assuming the truth of Christianity before it has been proved. Harold Netland, “Apologetics, Worldviews, and the Problem of Neutral Criteria,” *Trinity Journal* 12 (1991): 39–58, and more recently John Feinberg in *Can You Believe It’s True?* both make the claim that some “neutral” criteria are needed to adjudicate between competing worldviews. In *Dissonant Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 183–89, Netland lists these neutral criteria as basic logical principles, self-defeating statements, worldview coherence, adequacy of explanation, consistency with knowledge in other fields, and moral assessment.

When John’s Feinberg’s brother, Paul, suggested seven nearly identical criteria of truth, my chief objection was Feinberg’s omission of the criterion of scripturality. Of the proposed list, I said, “They, too, play important roles in apologetic argument and in all human knowledge. Scripturality is the major test, but consistency, correspondence, and the others can be helpful when governed by biblical presuppositions. Without those presuppositions, however, they need direction.” *Five Views on Apologetics*, 197. Contrary to the sometimes oversimplified claims to neutral criteria, it must be remembered that “Christians and non-Christians simply do not agree on what constitutes empirical correspondence, comprehensiveness, simplicity, and the rest. Logic is not neutral. It can be used to glorify God or to resist him.” *Ibid.*, 197–98. At bottom, these criteria are *not* neutral. They are grounded in the nature and comprehensive plan of the God revealed in Scripture. While the law of noncontradiction can be known, recognized, and employed apart from submission to God’s Word (because of the non-Christian’s creation as *imago Dei* and the Spirit’s preserving work of common grace), the apologist should not ultimately be satisfied with such a relatively superficial concession. The Christian should—given the opportunity—lovingly ask the non-Christian how these criteria line up with his worldview. While unbelievers make use of these criteria (that is to say, there is formal agreement), they properly belong within a biblical worldview and therefore are anything but neutral.

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

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 in which we should, according to Scripture, build on that foundation.

For the unbeliever, God might use apologetic reasoning to sweep aside rationalizations, arguments by which the subject resists conversion. Apologetics might 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 still might 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, "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). 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 good conscience," so that those who slander them will be "put to shame." 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 that we are inclined to regard as theoretical.⁴²

42. Compare the mostly practical criteria for the teaching office in 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9. Cf. *DKG*, 324.

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 put to shame.

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 falsehoods and sometimes of speaking without love. The first 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 without love.⁴³ 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 no controversy is 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 (Prov. 13:10; 18:6; 19:13; 26:21; Hab. 1:3; Rom. 2:8; 1 Cor. 1:11; 11:16; Phil. 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 from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (vv. 17–18). Paul even tells us that “knowledge” without love is not true knowledge: “We know that ‘all of us possess knowledge.’ This ‘knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he 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 that we are called to defend with word and life—says, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9),⁴⁴ and “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (Rom. 12:18).⁴⁵

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

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

45. I grant that many passages of the Bible from the prophets, Jesus, and the 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 who (1) 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 displeases God. The Protestant Reformers used similarly strong language (which can usually be justified on these principles). Most of those today who

Hear also Peter, again in our theme text, urging the virtues of “gentleness” and “respect.” Gentleness is the way of love and peacemaking, a trait quite opposed to the contentious spirit. In circles such as 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.⁴⁶

“Respect” is the ESV translation of the Greek word *phobos*, “fear.” The translations that 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.

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 again my *Evangelical Reunion*, especially the appendix containing Dennis Johnson’s sermon.

46. Note the preceding footnote in this respect.

In this extensively redeveloped and expanded version of *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (1994), renowned theologian John Frame sheds light on the message and method of genuinely Christian apologetics in terms of proof, defense, and offense.

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APOLOGETICS

ISBN: 978-1-59638-938-0

