

“A Critique of Classical Apologetics.”

CENTURION EDUCATION FOUNDATION

By

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Which methodology should you use in order to best understand truth?

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October 14, 2017

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will endeavor to explain the biblical basis for this body of study, which we refer to as apologetics. In doing so with the intention to determine what are biblical apologetic studies and activities, and what might better be defined as philosophical argumentations. The next aspect will be to discover the theological basis for apologetics. It may be an understatement, but theology should drive all ministry and spiritual activity. Just as theology drives the biblical basis for one's biblical worldview, so doctrine is the engine which develops ones methodology and philosophy of apologetics.

The next building block which will be sought to be installed is the foundational block of epistemology. This is to say one must determine what truth is before one may defend or advance that truth. To continue on in the aspect of seeking truth, it is of the same importance to determine the biblical philosophy of apologetics. For example many counselors employ the philosophy of sociology and psychology. These are certainly philosophies, and they certainly have a different approach, and has a far different outcome than does biblical apologetics.

The pursuit of truth in apologetics leads next to searching out the basis for the classical approach to apologetics. Involved in this pursuit of the basis for truth is the stated outcome of apologetics. The next block to be identified in classical apologetics is to describe its philosophy of which classical apologetics is built upon. As a result of these aspects of classical apologetics we will consider the limitations of this apologetic methodology.

Finally this writer will discuss the outcomes of presuppositional apologetics as part of the final analysis. The classical approach, basis and outcomes, will be compared and contrasted with the basis and outcomes of the presuppositional approach to apologetics.

The Basis for Biblical Apologetics

Whether one is a pastor, a teacher, an evangelist, or a missionary, all are apologists for the Lord Jesus Christ. All have special revelation from which to be an apologist must speak. Everyone in each of these ministry capacities has the same mandate he must follow. The Great Commission is the message, but Scripture is not silent as it relates to methodology. The apologist must not only find the message in Scripture of which to advance, but also biblical approach. This writing will seek to communicate both message and methodology.

Surprisingly, Plato had something to say about this. Edward John Cornell referenced Plato when he stated, “When Plato said that one must ‘take the best and most irrefragible of human theories, and let this be the raft upon which he sails through life—not without risk, as I admit, if he cannot find some word of God which will more surely and safely carry him,’¹ he nicely stated the alternatives any philosopher must face. One either constructs his opinions from experience and then runs a risk that they will be invalid for tomorrow, or he has claim to some sure word of God as an external reference point at which he sets his lever.”² The sentiment of Plato’s comments seem to be saying, if one is going to develop a worldview, to include a basis for living one’s life, one had better make sure that the integrity of that foundation be secure.

The Apostle Paul by his life and ministry gave New Testament believers a good ministry modal in which to pattern ones present ministry after is seen in I Peter 3:5 “But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear:” Serious men of God must look at this passage and ask, where did these first century believer find these “answer” in which they formulated

¹ Phaedo, 85b.

² Edward John Cornell, *An Introduction to Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: WM. B Eermans Publishing Company, 1976), 174.

“reasons” for which they were commanded “to give answer to every man that asketh...”v.5.

Doctor Luke, the human author of the book of Acts, gave a teachable example of how to deal with ungodly philosophies in the first century, as Luke penned in, Acts 17:18 “Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babblers say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.” Strange philosophies and false teachers are nothing new. Luke recorded this example how false teaching is dealt with, as Paul skillfully used the Scriptures to win this unbeliever to Christ. The apostle Paul taught the man about Jesus Christ and the resurrection. Paul when to Athens, known as an intellectual center, to a place called, Mars’ Hill, and there Paul applied what might be called today as presuppositional apologetics. Here in a center of intellectualism Paul told them about the Creation. Paul referenced, Acts 17:24 “God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;” It would seem as though that if anything would convince the lost of their need for a Saviour it was the cross and the Creation.

Now that Paul as shown how he dealt with the philosophers of the day one can see how he dealt with those of the Jewish religion as in Acts 18:19 “And he came to Ephesus, and left them there: but he himself entered into the synagogue, and reasoned with the Jews.” Paul made biblical argumentation to persuade the Jews that Jesus was the Messianic prophesy from the Old Testament fulfilled in the New Testament era. Paul’s examples of the use of presuppositional apologetics has given pastors, missionaries and evangelist of our day a roadmap on a biblical approach to applying apologetics to ministry today. Much more could be said relative to the biblical basis for a presuppositional approach to apologetics. The intentions of all approached to apologetics are not what is in question. What is in question are the basis for one’s approach to apologetics and the outcomes of each perspective approach which is to be discussed.

The Theological Basis for Apologetics

Theology is the study of God, but as a theist one understands there are many aspects of theology. Sometimes referred to as systematic theology, the study of biblical apologetics might be called, theological apologetics. What might make up this theological apologetics? John MacArthur stated, “A true Christian worldview begins with the conviction that God Himself has spoken in Scripture. As Christians, we are committed to the Bible as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God. We believe it is reliable and true from cover to cover, in every jot and tittle (cf. Matt. 5:18). Scripture, therefore, is the standard by which we must test all other truth-claims. Unless that axiom dominates our perspective on all life, we cannot legitimately claim to have embraced a Christian worldview.”³ MacArthur is arguing for a biblical worldview, and that is precisely what an apologist argues for, a biblical worldview, to include Creation, the Resurrection, and personal salvation through Jesus Christ.

One always does well to press, even with an atheist, that the Bible is God’s perfect, holy Word, as stated in II Timothy 3:16-17 “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.” MacArthur also stated, relative to the supremacy of Scripture, “That is the starting point for a true Christian worldview—and it is the starting point to which Christians must inevitable return in order to evaluate and discern every competing opinion and philosophy. Scripture is true. It is reliable. And above all, it is sufficient to guide us in every aspect of developing a worldview that honors God.”⁴ Making the case for a biblical worldview seems to be the very beginning point of a biblical apologetic.

³ John MacArthur, *Think Biblically: Recovering a Christian Worldview* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

MacArthur goes after those who think there is a higher source of truth than the Word of God. He explained, “That statement is the echo of neo-gnosticism. Belittling those who believe the Bible is sufficient, these latter-day ‘clouds without water’ (Jude 12) insist that they are privy to a higher, more sophisticated secret knowledge that holds the real answer to what troubles the human soul. Do not be intimidated by their false claims. No higher knowledge, no hidden truth, nothing besides the all-sufficient resources that we find in Christ exists that will change the human heart.”⁵ Though MacArthur was making the case for biblical counseling, the parallel with presuppositional apologetics is clear. Any Bible-believing pastor would certainly not counsel with error or human reasoning.

The pursuit of apologetically biblical truth ought not to take a back seat to Platonic or Aristotle’s philosophies. The pursuit of apologetics is about truth, and thus the Words of God ought to weigh heavy on the minds as the apologist crafts his witness to the unsaved world.

The theology of the resurrection of Jesus Christ stands upon the theology of the Creation, which is what our apologetic is built upon. Lewis Sperry Chafer explained this way,

“With no ability to receive the things of God or to know them, man is unable to give intelligent consent to the dictum that all existing things were created from nothing by the immediate fiat of God (Heb. 11:3). Recognizing, however, that all existing things must have a beginning, he proceeds to construct his own solution of the problem of origin. The best he has done is represented by theories of evolution, which theories, because of their inconsistencies and unproved hypotheses are somewhat worse than no solution at all. Is man who so fails to discover any reasonable solution of his problem at the same time to be credited with the authorship of the Genesis account of creation, which account is the basis whereon all subsequent revelation proceeds?”⁶

⁵ John MacArthur, *Counseling: How to Counsel Biblically* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 17.

⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology*, (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 26.

The Epistemological Basis for Apologetics

As believers and unbelievers seek truth, unbelievers mostly looking in the wrong direction, it is incumbent upon the believer to be seeking and communicating truth. Greg Bahnsen argued hard and long for truth in one's apologetic argumentation. Influenced greatly by Van Til, Bahnsen argued persuasively like this, "The unbeliever attempts to enlist logic, science, and morality in his debate against the truth of Christianity. Van Til's apologetic answers these attempts by arguing that only truth of Christianity can rescue the meaningfulness and cogency of logic, science, and morality. The presuppositional challenge to the believer is guided by the premise that only the Christian worldview provides the philosophical preconditions necessary for man's reasoning and knowledge in any field whatever."⁷ Whatever one's preference or conviction maybe relative to apologetic methodology it is most certainly prudent to consider working the offensive side of the argument for a biblical epistemological apologetic, rather than surrendering to the unbelieving epistemology.

Bahnsen continued his well framed argumentation for the apologist to hold to and employ a biblical epistemology in his apologetic endeavors. Bahnsen expressed it this way, "Theology applies the Word of God. So does evangelism. So does Christian philosophy. So does apologetics (just notice how often Scripture has been alluded to above). It ought to be clear, then, that these different tasks at least share a common commitment to the authority of God as revealed in His Word."⁸ The argument is that the believer's epistemology works in every spiritual endeavor and area of study, so biblical epistemology will certainly work in apologetics.

⁷ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

Bahnsen makes a strong biblical argument for biblical truth. he stated, “The subject of a Christian View of Life must be studied historically and systematically in order to understand it comprehensively. If we study it thus we find that we face an ultimate choice between Christian and non-Christian epistemology. Especially because of the modern emphasis on the immanence of God, it is necessary to become clearly aware of the deep antithesis between the two main types of epistemology.”⁹ Thus that way he made this statement a Christian can see that this is a black and white situation.

John Frame made a similar argument relative to a biblical epistemology. Frame stated, “Scripture is God’s Word, and therefore it is self-attesting. There is no higher authority than Scripture by which we can verify it, for there is no authority higher than God. God’s Word is self-attesting because he is self-contained. He has within Himself all the resources He needs to justify His Word to us.”¹⁰ This of course is a powerful argument that the apologist should depend upon the authority of God’s Word to do the spiritual warfare that every apologist faces in the ministry.

Frame continued his argument this way, “So apologetics seeks to bring to unbelievers that self-attest message. Apologetics also seek to present reasons for believing that message. But the reasons may not contradict the message itself. So our ultimate appeal may not be to human reason, sense expression, feeling, or any merely human authority. Ultimately the apologist must appeal to Scripture in order to defend Scripture.”¹¹ This makes biblical sense. Use the Sword of the Scriptures to defend Scripture, as well as to advance the Scriptures.

⁹ Ibid., Bahnsen, 165.

¹⁰ John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 273.

¹¹ Ibid., 273.

The Philosophical Basis for Apologetics

The philosophy of apologetics is made up of two elements, epistemology (the study of truth), and ontology (the nature of being). The two must come together for apologetics to accomplish what it is attended to. Dagobert Runes expressed it this way,

“The scope of epistemology may be indicated by considering its relations to the allied disciplines: (a) metaphysics, and (b) logic. Speculative philosophy is commonly considered to embrace metaphysics and epistemology as its two coordinate branches, or if the term metaphysics be extended to embrace the whole of speculative philosophy, than epistemology and ontology become the two main subdivisions of metaphysics in the wide sense. Whichever usage is adopted, epistemology as the philosophical theory of knowledge is one of the two main branches of philosophy.”¹²

One might describe this connection as theology (the study of God) and anthropology (the study of man). This is to say, that apologetics brings together, both man and God or better said, apologetics brings man to God. God is complete without man, but man needs God. Apologetics without man is of no value. Next Runes continues to argue for a epistemology based on presuppositions. He explained,

“Between these two extremes is the view that epistemology and metaphysics are logically Interdependent and that metaphysically presuppositionless epistemology is as unattainable as an epistemologically presuppositionalist metaphysics. (b) Despite the fact that traditional logic embraced many topics which would now be considered epistemological, the demarcation between logic and epistemology is now fairly clear-cut: logic is the formal science of the principles governing valid reasoning; epistemology is the philosophical science of the nature of knowledge and truth.”¹³

Thus, to restate and clarify, logic is a science. Logic helps to determine reason, and epistemology is a philosophical science, to help better understand truth.

¹² Dagobert D. Runes, *Dictionary of Philosophy: Revised and Enlarged* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1983), 109.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 109.

The Basis for Classical Apologetics

Richard Howe, professor of apologetics defined classical apologetics this way, “Classical Apologetics is often grouped with Evidentialism. This is understandable since The Classical method shares a lot in common with Evidentialism. Some apologists who consider themselves Classical might not strive to maintain any principled (or practical) differences between the two.”¹⁴ If Howe is correct, and this writer would concur that Classical and Evidential Apologetics most certainly do overlap one another, than offering a definition of Evidentialism.

Henry Morris described like this, “The term ‘apologetics’ and ‘evidences,’ as they relate to the Christian faith are often used more or less interchangeably. In the formal sense, however, the first is the broader of the two terms as understood by theologians. Apologetics involves the systematic science defense of the Christian faith in all its aspects against the intellectual attacks of its adversaries. There are various philosophical systems of apologetics, each attempting to build a logical defense of Christianity upon its own specific or implied presuppositions.”¹⁵ Thus it would seem to this writer that the classical approach bleeds into evidentialism. Classical and presuppositional apologetics hold to two very different philosophies. Not necessarily different worldviews, as this writer never intends to impune the motives or intent of a classical apologist. The intent of the ends are the same, to lead unbelievers to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, but the means are either humanistic or biblical.

¹⁴ Richard G. Howe, “Christian Apologetics Journal,” Southern Evangelical Seminary (Fall 2013), 8.

¹⁵ Henry M. Morris, *Many Infallible Proofs* (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers, 1974), 1.

The Philosophy of Classical Apologetics

Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner were editors of an encyclopedia on apologetics, and they described the philosophy of classical apologetics this way, “Philosophical Apologetics emphasize the importance of showing that the Christian worldview is reasonable. Underlying the effort is a number of basic assumptions. First is the confidence that, in the end, faith and reason are not in conflict. Faith, while it may go beyond reason, is never a complete leap in the dark.”¹⁶ Though it is good that Caner and Hindson have the nobility to come to the defense of believing by faith, it seems a little disingenuous that faith needs a parachute from reason to make absolutely sure that the Christian believer makes it all the way to heaven. Hindson and Caner continued, “Philosophical apologetics also seeks to encourage people to look at objective truth and evaluate their current beliefs according to established grounds for knowledge. Knowledge is ‘justified true belief’ and it is irrational to hold on to beliefs that have no justification, or which may be shown to be objectively false.”¹⁷

As a Christian one must ask, what is a biblical worldview? And what is a biblical philosophy? A Christian apologist must further ask, what is it which will convert the soul? Can biblical reasoning really be helped by secular reasoning relative to an apologetic conversation with the lost world? These questions are all rhetorical, and just reading or hearing them ring out in the ears of a believer should set off an alarm bell that warns that seems to be counter to the claims of Scripture and our Saviour. Romans 1:17 “For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.”

¹⁶ Ergun Caner, and Ed Hindson, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2008), 53.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

Richard Howe gave another definition relative to Classical Apologetics. He continued, “The second level of the Classical method maintains that God’s existence can be proven by a number of lines of evidence and argument. These would include the cosmological argument, in terms of which God is argued as the cause of the existence of the universe, the teleological argument, in terms of which God is argued as the cause of the design of the universe as things tend toward their appropriate end, and the Moral argument, in terms of which God is argued as the grounding for moral reality.”¹⁸ These are of course the classic (pun intended) arguments of classical/evidentialism, and all well intended, but of course Scripture declares that God exists. Romans 11;36 “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” Next we’ll discuss some limitations to classical apologetics.

¹⁸ Ibid., Howe, 16.

The Limitations of Classical Apologetics

God's Holiness

“The proposition that existence precedes essence is a central claim of existentialism, which reverses the traditional philosophical view that the essence (the nature) of a thing is more fundamental and immutable than its existence (the mere fact of its being).”¹⁹ The essences of God is His holiness. First, God was not a created Being, He is eternally past and future. Second, His essence (holiness) produces what He is. His holiness produced the Universe, the World, and sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross to redeem sinful man back to Himself. Thus, holiness of God would demand holy means to draw man unto Himself. Hebrews 7:25

“Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.”

Reasoning

Greg Bahnsen discussed the problem of the autonomous reasoning of truth outside the mind of God. He described it like this, “By epistemological autonomy is meant the ability to attain to knowledge independent of God’s revelation and existence. The person who rejects the Word of God feels that he can find truth with his own powers of exploration, examination, and explanation. He thinks that personal knowledge of the world is attainable irrespective of God’s existence.”²⁰

A strong argument Bahnsen made for knowledge of God and Creation that comes from the mind of God, namely the Word of God. This writer was once talking to a man about his soul and he was challenging whether the Bible was true or not. He was challenged with the idea of studying God without the Bible. Impossible! This man came to faith in Christ!

¹⁹ Søren Kierkegaard, “Existence precedes essence,” Wikipedia, https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Existence_precedes_essence (accessed October 14, 2017).

²⁰ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended* (Nacogdoches, TX, Covenant Media Press., 2008), 97.

Humanism

Bahnsen further discussed the issue of humanism and its source. He explained, “Christ is the very wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:24) even though the world of unbelief sees Him and His gospel as folly (v. 18). This fact must take hold of the apologist in order that he might remain faithful to his presuppositions as found in God’s revealed Word, despite the world’s demand for signs and philosophical proofs (vv. 22-23) which cater to its own assumptions and presumed autonomy in the realm of epistemology.”²¹

Bahnsen he was making a direct argument for presuppositionalism, and was a direct reference to the original sins in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:5 “For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” And the word, “knowing” in this passage gives the idea of humanism. In other words, for example, for man to take matters into his own hands, rather than allow the Lord to direct, and bless a believer. Cf. Getting ahead of God.

Knowing Truth

Douglass Hoffman discussed this idea of Christ –centered truth. he explained, “In other words, a proposition is true if and only if what the author is saying to be the case actually is the case. We use the term truth in a third way to refer to a set of true propositions, and we refer to one member of that set as ‘a truth.’ Finally, we use the term truth as an adjective roughly synonymous with the term genuine, as in true love or true friend; or legitimate, as in the true heir; or faithful, as in true to the cause.”²²

The idea Hoffman was communication and the application to apologetics is that the meaning of truth comes from its Author, the Lord Jesus Christ. Furthermore, the message of that truth is determined by the Lord’s intent. Most certainly the atheist does not determine truth.

²¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacogdoches, TX, Covenant Media Press., 1996), 95.

²² Douglass S. Hoffman, *Christian Contours: How a Biblical Worldview Shapes the Mind and the Heart* (Grand Rapids; Kregel Publications, 2011), 59.

Theological Convictions

H. Richard Niebuhr argued for the real transformer of culture. All would agree the atheist must be transformed by faith in Jesus Christ. Niebuhr argued for his theological convictions in this manner, “Christ is for Wesley the transformer of life; he justifies men by giving them faith; he deals with the sources of human action; he makes no distinctions between the moral and the immoral citizens of human commonwealths, in convicting all of self-love and in opening to all the life of freedom in response to God’s forgiving love.”²³

Niebuhr used an excellent example of one who helped to change the culture, John Wesley, who was a key man that was instrumental in opening up America to Democracy through the conversion of so many in early America. The theological conviction relative to apologetics is that it is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Holy Words of Scripture which change people hearts. With this theological conviction in in heart and mind presuppositional apologetics will win the hearts and minds of men back to the Lord Jesus Christ.

²³ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1951), 219.

CONCLUSION

The Final Analysis of Classical and Presuppositional Apologetics

This study began with the biblical basis for an apologetic methodology which sited apologetic authors and most important Scriptures pertaining to presuppositional apologetics. Most notable was I Peter 3:15 and Luke 17:18; and Acts 17:24. Holding to a biblical approach to the apologetic ministry will assure God's highest glory and man's highest good.

The theological basis for apologetics was then addressed. There was reference made to Matthew 5:18 and II Timothy 3:16-17. Theology is the body of study for any one given doctrine, and goes beyond one key verse. This study had the company of MacArthur and Chafer to further explain the importance of the theology that supports a presuppositional apologetic.

This next area of study is that of epistemology. This body of study is fascinating and important to any area of the things of God. Relative to the epistemology of apologetics one cannot study this without much input from Van Til, who is sometimes called the father of presuppositional apologetics. In addition to him Greg Bahnsen and John Frame gave great supportive information to the argument for presuppositional apologetics.

Sometimes a philosophical aspect of a subject may be overlooked. A definition of the philosophy of epistemology and to include the metaphysics aspect were addressed, as well as the nature of truth. The real critique of classical apologetics came when the basis for this methodology was expressed. This study revealed that classical apologetics does in fact blend into evidentialism. The philosophy of classical apologetics was also revealed from the definition and explanation by Ergun Caner and Ed Hindson. Their explanation demonstrated a slight contempt for presuppositionalism, being faulted for a faith basis of methodology. The final answer to that sentiment was Romans 1:17.

The last phase of this study dealt with the limitations of classical apologetics. First was the issue of the holiness of God, which is to say that if the lost are to be won to Christ it will be because of repentance toward God. In other words, Christ will make the repentant person acceptable to a Holy righteous God, because of Christ' holiness. Reasoning was also discussed, with the aid of Bahnsen to understand that one's reasoning must be one that is biblical reasoning so that the unbeliever can come under conviction and accept Christ as Saviour. The issue of humanism was discussed as well. It's origins in the Garden of Eden. Humanistic thoughts and methodology can slip into any believers mind, thus it is important that the believer look at this thinking as Scripture presents itself. In a similar vein we discussed knowing truth. Simply put one must define their terms, and in this case it is imperative that Christians define what truth is and what it is not. Thus the criteria must hold to Scripture to define truth. Finally the topic of theological convictions were briefly mentioned. Though brief, it is important to understand that ultimately it is Scripture and the power of Christ who saves souls and changes the culture in the process. The hope of this writer is that the case has been made that presuppositional apologetics is the methodology outlined in Scripture. Presuppositionalism will accomplish the job of convicting of sin and unrightousness, and will guide the unbeliever to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

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