



The Defense of the Christian Faith

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How to Answer an Unbeliever from Scripture: Using the Two-Step Apologetic Approach

Note: Apologetics, simply defined, is the defense of the Christian faith.

The two-step apologetic procedure/approach to answering the unbeliever using scripture should be a fundamentally systematic thing for the Christian. The most important concept that the Christian should understand is that it is not “wit against wit” or “intellect against intellect;” It is God’s truth against the lies of Satan. When the believer realizes who he is in Christ Jesus and what kind of help (the Holy Spirit) he has on his side when challenges to our belief system are questioned, then he should willingly and boldly stand up and use the wisdom of God as the authority on which his answers are based.

Cornelius Van Til’s Two-Step approach of Apologetics is derived from his steadfast belief that all facts or proofs have to go through the Word of God test. Of course, Van Til never put facts or proofs first; The Word of God comes first and the facts or proofs are secondary. To summarize Van Til’s thinking, it would have to be with the following verse in mind:

“We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ...” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

Van Til pulled no punches in attacking Liberalism while he was ministering and evangelizing. He, as a Christian, looked at the world through one pair of glasses and the non-Christian looked through an entirely different pair of glasses. *The Christian looks at every fact, and interprets*

every fact, according to Christian presuppositions. The non-Christian on the other hand looks at every fact, and interprets every fact, according to non-Christian presuppositions. There is no neutrality. There are no situations where we simply see the facts as they are – what Van Til calls “brute facts”, bare, uninterpreted facts. We always interpret the facts, through our “glasses”, either the Christian or the non-Christian variety. And those two sets of interpretations are diametrically opposed to one another.”¹

This is the Antithesis in which we get the two-step approach. What distinguishes Van Til’s philosophy from other Christian and even Reformed apologetics, is the consistency with which he applies the Antithesis.

For the theologian who has a deep and sincere desire to adequately and biblically present the gospel to the lost and dying world, he must establish a consistent apologetic. It was Cornelius Van Til that said, *“A consistently Christian theory of knowledge must affirm that the triune God revealed in nature and Scripture is the ultimate reference point for all knowledge and predication. Man’s sinful attempts to interpret both himself and his environment without reference to God, inevitably leads to incoherence and intellectual futility.”²*

The Presuppositional approach, according to Van Til, is the recognition that one’s basic assumptions are determinative of one’s evaluation and interpretation of evidence as well as one’s method of argumentation and reasoning. There are no such things as “brute” or “self interpreting” facts.

.... “It is impossible to reason on the basis of brute facts. Every one who reasons about facts comes to those facts with a schematism into which he fits the facts. The real question is, therefore, into whose schematism the facts will fit.”³

The Apostle Paul’s apologetics were based on a set of rhetorical questions found in 1 Corinthians 1:20, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” For Paul, he knew that what the world calls “foolish” is in reality “wisdom.” He also knew that what the world thinks is “wise” is actually “foolish.” These quotes from Paul are what the Presuppositionalist holds as “truth in apologetics.” The truth is that the unbeliever’s standards are all turned around and he thus

¹ Masterson, Archibald, Cornelius’ Spectacles, <http://www.solagrati.org>, article, page 3 of 10.

² Article from the *Evangelical Theologian and Nonfoundationalism*, page 6 of 7, <http://haus-von-nomos.com/kp2.html>

³ *Ibid*, *Evangelical Theologian and Nonfoundationalism*, page 6 of 7.

mocks the Christian faith or, at least, views it as intellectually dishonorable. Paul went on to say that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25). God exposes the unbeliever’s thoughts and conniving practices as what it truly is....utter foolishness. 1 Corinthians 1:27 states that “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong...” In other words, God can and will unmask the arrogance of unbelief and display its despicable pretense of knowledge.

As to answering the unbeliever through Scripture using the above approach, it is imperative that the believer’s heart and mind is saturated in God’s Word and his whole being totally given to the Holy Spirit’s methods of convicting and convincing the unbeliever. When the believer feels like arguing or feeling totally frustrated with the unbeliever’s attitude concerning God and the unbeliever’s need for the salvation offered, that is when the believer needs to recognize that he is off-base and falling into the trap of Satan. The believer must control his own actions before he can control the “witness situation” with an unbeliever.

What the believer must understand is:

*In the face of God’s revelation the unbeliever is “without an apologetic” (cf. Romans 1:20, in the Greek). His intellectual position has no worthwhile credentials in the long run. When he comes up against the intellectual challenge of the gospel as Paul would present it, the unregenerate is left with no place to stand.”*⁴ The late Dr. Greg Bahnsen stated in his book, *Always Ready*, that “the fool (the non-Christian) must be answered by showing him his foolishness and the necessity of Christianity as the precondition of intelligibility.”

It also should be noted that the believer’s defense is more than words. It is truth in words and deeds. The Christian should be prepared for battle. This battle is not to win a war or an argument. It is a battle to win a precious soul for the Kingdom of God. It is compassionately and humbly praying and working to win the soul of a lost, foolish and arrogant person.

“The most important decision any one is ever called on to make is to settle, in his heart, once for all, the matter on his attitude toward Christ. On that depends everything. How can anyone be so blind, or so dumb, as to go through life, and face death, without the Christian Hope? Apart from Christ, what is there, what can there be, either for this world, or the next, to make life worthwhile? We all have to die (Hebrews 9:27). Why try

⁴ Bahnsen, Greg, *Always Ready*, page 59-60.

to laugh if off? It seems like every human being would welcome Christ with open arms, and consider it the proudest privilege of his life to wear the Christian name.”⁵

Although Halley, in the above quote, believed strongly in evangelism and is on track as to death, the importance of accepting Christ, the “dumbness” and “blindness” of going through life without a hope, he seems to not understand that “the unbeliever is suppressing the truth” because he does not have the mind of Christ. Until the unbeliever accepts the fact that Christ died for his sins, and accepts Jesus as the Son of God, and acknowledges that to God and to man, it is impossible for him to know the truth. As stated previously, *“it is the precondition of intelligibility (Greg Bahnsen, Always Ready)”*. In other words, logic and reason cannot be truth unless it starts with God. All views against Christianity are against reality.

Paul Henebury, Professor at Tyndale Theological Seminary and Biblical Institute, has stated on several occasions in his Apologetics class that *“logic comes from the mind of God.”* Professor Henebury goes on to say that *“Laws of Logic are facts God has put in motion and He is the ultimate authority over everything. Therefore, we must give glory to God for every available source in life. Sin is when man refuses to give glory to God. Unbelievers use the gifts of God (even to the point of discovering new inventions/devices), enjoy the beauty of heaven and earth... and yet refuse to give glory to God who is creator of it all.”⁶*

God does not need creation. He has existed in three (3) persons always. God decided to create (Genesis 1); He decided to create man for relationship; He revealed Himself to man; He told man why he was created; He revealed His mind to man; Man is dependent upon God for all knowledge...which are all part of the Presuppositional approach to Apologetics. However, in this apologetic approach, it is understood that man has the natural tendency to pull away from God or to rebel against his Creator...independent of the Maker of Heaven and Earth.

As a Christian, our weapons are *“Spiritual and are mighty before God unto the casting down of every high imagination that is exalted against the knowledge of God” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5)*. Notice that the unbeliever’s defense or offense is not really addressed against you...the believer. It is going against “the knowledge of God.” If it were our knowledge vs. another man’s knowledge, then it would be pitting “man against man.” However, we don’t use our knowledge that we have achieved by gaining “wisdom of the world” (self-attained knowledge).

⁵ Halley, Henry H., Halley’s Bible Handbook, page 21.

⁶ Henebury, Paul, Notes from his Apologetics Class (Summer, 2006).

We use the knowledge that we have received by *“being diligent to present ourselves approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15). We can only do that by knowing the One who is the Word and who has given us the Helper to present the facts according to the knowledge of God. Following the words in 2 Timothy, the following is very true and clear for the Christian, *“...avoid worldly and empty chatter for it will lead to further ungodliness, and their talk will spread like gangrene.....”* This is why we do not argue; we present the case with no strings attached...just the facts according to the Word. In fact...facts without the Word is “foolishness.” Remember, what the world calls “foolish” is in reality wisdom. Likewise, what the world deems “wise” is actually foolish.

Van Til was very adamant about sticking to the fundamental truths of God’s Word and not adhering to the philosophies of man.

There were two reasons why Van Til was adamant about not straying from one basic truth...never relying on anything that “unregenerate” man might present as truth.

- (1) One is because of sin. The point is that the “depravity of man” is total. It affects every person, and it affects every person at every level of their being. It also affects their mind – what is sometimes called the “noetic effects of sin”. Sin darkens the mind. Only regeneration can remove the darkness and illuminate it. The unregenerate mind can do nothing other than interpret the facts...all facts, all the time (just as Satan wants).
- (2) The other reason is because of the Word of God. Van Til desires for the Scriptures to form the presupposition behind the way we look at everything. This is to do all... (Yes, all) from faith, to take every thought captive to Christ, not just some things. Science, logic, philosophy, art, sports...all facts are included.

Van Til states that the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian lies fundamentally at the level of the SIGNIFICANCE they place upon facts. In interpreting facts, it is a matter of where the facts lie in one’s system of thought, one’s world-and-life view. Even if the Christian and non-Christian agree on some facts, it is where the facts are in their mind. Van Til places facts secondary and the Word of God first. The unbeliever interprets the same facts agreed on according to his wrong system, ultimately with reference to himself as opposed to God.

When discussing God and Truth with the unbeliever, it is important to ask the right questions. The right questions can uncover the truth...for the unbeliever. The Christian's basic presuppositions are the existence of a Triune God, and the fact of His having spoken to us in His infallible Word. Now...from that Word, we learn of the key pattern of Creation, Fall of man, and man's redemption that has shaped all history...as far back as the Word takes us...and that was creation itself (Genesis 1 and 2) through the redemption story found throughout the Word of God. All facts must be interpreted according to these truths. By asking the right questions about how the unbeliever sees the facts within the scheme of Creation/Fall/Redemption, the Christian will soon uncover the fact that the unbeliever sees things differently...i.e. do you believe God's Word when He claimed that He formed the heavens and earth and created man? Do you believe that man could have chosen to obey God in lieu of his fall by rebelling and disobeying the commands of God? Do you believe that man sinned and that God has provided a means whereby we can be redeemed or set right with God? Do you believe that way is through Jesus Christ, God's only Son? Even if the unbeliever speaks the same way we do about the facts...and is willing to speak about creation, sin, and salvation – he means something different, because he interprets things according to a radically different system of belief. Paul stated to the believers at Corinth, *“...we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written, ‘Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him.’ For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.....Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man (unbeliever) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Corinthians 2:7-10; 12-14). This natural man is “worldly minded” (same word used in Jude 19)...which means “devoid of the Spirit.”*

The Presuppositionalist's philosophy should be put into practice with clarity and with one goal in mind, loving the sinner (the unsaved) while literally hating the sin that is evident in the

unrepentant person. Yes, we are sinners saved by grace...but, our (the believer's) sin is covered by the blood of Jesus (Acts 20:28; Romans 5:9; Ephesians 1:7). However, the unrepentant sinner does not acknowledge that their sin keeps them from the Truth. Why should we hate sin so much? Because it is a stench in the nostrils of God and it was sin that placed His Son on the cross. Proverbs 8:13 states, "To fear God is to hate evil." Since it also states in Proverbs 1:7 that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," we should understand that the non-Christian has not even begun to accept God's knowledge...much less understand that his sin keeps him from understanding the ways and methods of God (Romans 1).

The Christian must never look at the world, the world's views, the world's activities through any pair of glasses other than that which holds to the Word of Truth...and let everything else pass through its view (test its validity to the Word, not on human facts...even if human facts are true or proved). In other words, we should never try to look at the world through any other view other than that which is based on the Word of God. To do so opens ourselves up to Satan's scheme...the worldly scheme. Satan used this tactic with Eve in the Garden and he has used this tactic in every generation since. Satan will use this tactic until he is cast into the lake of fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Our obedience to God is the fact that He is glorified in His Word and our obedience should be based on God's glory also. When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife, the glory of God was at stake as Joseph reacted to the temptress's request/offer (Genesis 39:7-9). Although Joseph showed concern for his master (Potiphar) in that it would dishonor him by yielding to this great evil, **his first and foremost concern was that by yielding to the temptation, he would sin against God, v.9?** Dishonoring God is simply not giving God the Glory in our lives...through disobedience and selfish acts. Honoring God is always found in obedience and selfless acts, "*To obey is better than sacrifice*" (1 Samuel 15:22). The same scripture states that the "*Lord delights in one of his own...obeying the voice of the Lord...*" The voice of God is found in His Word and testimony. The Lord states over and over again in His Word, "*He who has an ear, let him hear.....*" (Matthew 11:15, 13:9, 43; Revelation 2 and 3). It is imperative that we not only hear with our ears, but with our heart...for that is where the Spirit will provide us with the wisdom and understanding necessary to defend the faith.

One must not think that the Holy Spirit will enlighten the believer without the believer "*studying to show himself approved.*" There have been many preachers that have filled the pulpit and changed his sermon or teaching as he walked to the podium. However, this was not

because the Holy Spirit enlightened him with revelation knowledge whereby he can speak with a knowledge and wisdom without first praying, reading, studying. “*Rightly dividing the word of truth*” is not a gift, it is a decision by both God and man to team together to “depart the Word” with “God’s wisdom” and “revelation knowledge” revealed through the proper channels. The proper channel is God giving to man (John 14:16; 1 Corinthians 12), man giving in to a Holy God (Romans 12:1-3), and the Holy Spirit using the man as an effective tool for ministry in glorifying the Holy God...the Only God (1 Corinthians 12 and 14). Does God speak through man? Of course He does. Man must be a willing vessel and servant of a loving, Holy and precious God.

It is quite obvious that in dealing with the unchanged heart (the unbeliever) that the Spirit is not in him (Romans 8:9; Romans 1). Although the unbeliever knows deep down the truth of God’s existence, they intuitively suppress it. *The impact of general revelation, every fact crying out that God exists, constantly presses upon man. Because of the way God has made man, and still testifies to him, man is “incurably religious”. Every man has a sense of God’s existence – the sensus deitatis (seed of Religion) – even if it is suppressed.*⁷

This “seed of religion” is what some presuppositionalists call the “point of contact” that the believers have with the non-Christians. The apologist should not think that this “point of contact” is the same as what some other apologist views as “common ground” between the believer and the unbeliever. “Common ground” refers to facts that are interpreted in the same way by Christians and non-Christians. It is fact that “there are no such facts.” Again, the believer will never interpret facts in the same manner (from the same ground) as the non-believer. Without the Spirit working in the unbeliever, “facts” are distorted and interpreted in an entirely different perspective than one (the believer) that has the indwelling Holy Spirit residing in him. The “point of contact”, therefore, only refers to the fact that “deep down”, man knows that he is misinterpreting the facts, though he suppresses that knowledge. The person evangelizing or witnessing to the unbeliever has a task to appeal to that suppressed knowledge, as he tells the unbeliever (sinner) that the God whose voice he suppresses is also the One who can redeem and deliver him from death and darkness. It is our responsibility to witness and appeal to the “seed of religion”, but not on the basis of common interpretation of facts. The

⁷ Ibid, Archibald Masterson, Cornelius’ Spectacles, page 7 of 10.

believer needs to tell the unbeliever that deep down, he knows that the message we are bringing is true, though he will always suppress it until God changes his heart...and then his mind.

There will be some misunderstandings with the “rationale” (if one wants to call it that) presented above. When you look at it at first glance (and maybe the 2nd glance), you would think that there is no room for “evidences” of the faith, i.e. the rational argument based upon history, archaeology, science, etc....and that the “Presuppositional” approach simply means to present the Gospel and leave it at that. However, **most “Presuppositional” apologists do accept a place for “evidences.” Van Til did.....but it was a secondary place.**

It is very important that we understand and are aware of the fact that evidences do not prove our presuppositions (not in the sense of the word “proof”). The presuppositions come first. If they could be proven by some other rational argument, they would not be presuppositions. A presupposition is a starting point. The evidences demonstrate the truth of the presuppositions, but they do not provide a “proof” in the sense of a higher criterion of truth by which the presuppositions of the Bible are established to a neutral human reason.

In approaching the unbeliever, the good apologist should point out to unbelievers the “self-defeating” nature of their arguments. The apologist should point out to the unbeliever that their self-defeating presuppositions lead to a meaningless life (the Ecclesiastes drama), especially *Ecclesiastes 1:13-18*, “*And I set my mind to seek and explore by wisdom concerning all that has been done under heaven. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with. I have seen all the works which have been done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and striving after wind. What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted. I said to myself, ‘Behold, I have magnified and increased wisdom more than all who were over Jerusalem before me; and my mind has observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge.’ And I set my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly; I realized that this also is striving after wind. Because in much wisdom there is much grief, and increasing knowledge results in increasing pain.”*

Without God, the above mind-set is with the unbeliever (All is vanity...nothing after we die). Even if they believe that they will go to “the great place in the sky” after death, they see life as meaningless. As a believer and one that rightly divides the Word of Truth, we should then show them how Christian presuppositions alone allow a meaningful, self-supporting interpretation of the facts. We should answer an unbeliever (a fool) as his folly

deserves...showing him where his presuppositions lead, to vanity; Proverbs 26:4-5, *“Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool as his folly deserves, lest he be wise in his own eyes.”* These two verses are complementary rather than contradictory. While it is unwise to argue with a fool at his level and to recognize his foolish suppositions, there are occasions when it is best to refute him soundly, lest his foolish opinions seem to be confirmed.⁸

Mr. Ryrie “hit the nail on the head” when he called the fool as having “foolish opinions.” Man’s opinions versus God’s truth should not be in the same sentence structure, much less the possibility of being on the same plain with the Holy God’s written Word. It is imperative that every Christian understands that only when one humbles himself and realizes that without using the truth of God’s Word to thwart evil and to try to change a sinner’s opinion of life, God, and the future state of man, all is vain. Only when our testimony, our argument for the truth of God’s Word, and our actions to counter the enemy’s tactics are bathed in prayer, soaked in Biblical facts, and yielded to the Holy Spirit’s workings in us will we be successful in winning the wayward soul for Christ. No opinion by the theologian, the philosopher, Billy Graham, or any of the late, great Bible scholars is relevant unless God’s Word backs it up. Our presuppositions should always be Bible based and pointing to Christ.

⁸ Ryrie, Charles, The Ryrie Study Bible, comments at bottom of page, page 975.

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