

# Understanding Christian Apologetics

## Lesson 1: Introduction to Presuppositional/Covenantal Apologetics

### I. What Is Apologetics?

- A. From the Greek term *apologia*, which refers to a speech made in defense of something (see Acts 22:1; 1 Cor. 9:3; 2 Tim. 4:16; 1 Pet. 3:15)
- B. The art of Christian persuasion
  - 1. “Christian apologetics is the application of biblical truth to unbelief.”<sup>1</sup>
  - 2. “The natural man is, by virtue of his creation in the image of God, always accessible to the truth; accessible to the penetration of the truth by the Spirit of God. Apologetics, like systematics, is valuable to the precise extent that it presses the truth upon the attention of the natural man. The natural man must be blasted out of his hideouts, his caves, his last lurking places.”<sup>2</sup>

### II. The Distinctive Approach of Presuppositional/Covenantal Apologetics

- A. Recognize that there is no such thing as a neutral and unbiased starting point when it comes to the pursuit of truth
  - 1. “In spite of this claim to neutrality on the part of the non-Christian the Reformed apologist must point out that every method, the supposedly neutral one no less than any other, presupposes either the truth or the falsity of Christian theism.”<sup>3</sup>
  - 2. Because there is no such thing as a neutral position, the gospel cannot be proved by simply appealing to evidence or a logical argument

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<sup>1</sup> K. Scott Oliphant, *Covenantal Apologetics*, 29.

<sup>2</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 104-105.

<sup>3</sup> Van Til, 100.

3. Sinful man does not process evidence properly; he suppresses the truth (see Rom. 1:18)
- B. The non-Christian needs to be confronted by showing how the positions he holds are self-refuting (e.g. the claim, 'there is no such thing as absolute truth' is itself an absolute assertion)
1. "The work of the apologist is to uncover the tension between unbelief and the knowledge of God that everyone has."<sup>4</sup>
  2. "The natural man at bottom knows that he is the creature of God. He knows also that he is responsible to God. He knows that he should live to the glory of God. He knows that in all that he does he should stress that the field of reality which he investigates has the stamp of God's ownership upon it. But he suppresses his knowledge of himself as he truly is. He is the man with the iron mask. A true method of apologetics must seek to tear off that iron mask."<sup>5</sup>
- C. "To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, *circular reasoning*. The starting point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another."<sup>6</sup>

### III. The Basic Principles of Presuppositional/Covenantal Apologetics<sup>7</sup>

- A. Rooted in the nature of reality
1. There is a basic Creator-creature distinction
  2. God stands outside and above the world he has made

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<sup>4</sup> William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Van Til, 101.

<sup>6</sup> Van Til, 101.

<sup>7</sup> This section is based on a lecture by K. Scott Oliphant given at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

3. Jesus Christ is Lord over all people, even those who oppose him
4. Everything except God is created and therefore contingent
5. The only way we can know God is by virtue of his initiative
6. God has condescended to us and revealed himself to us
7. All people know God through general revelation, and this knowledge is covenantal in nature
  - a) The covenant of works is operative for all who are outside of Christ, and the covenant of grace is operative for all who are in Christ
  - b) "All people are by nature in covenant with God, and thus the truth revealed in nature is covenantal knowledge. As creatures in covenant, human beings cannot be confronted with God in nature without the obligation to respond appropriately."<sup>8</sup>

B. There is a fundamental conflict in the world

1. The antithesis: sharp opposition between God and fallen man (see Jn. 15:18-19; 17:14; 1 Jn. 4:4-6; 5:4-5)
2. Jesus did not come to bring peace but a sword (see Mt. 10:34)
3. There is no neutrality
4. Every position that is in opposition to Christianity cannot make sense of the real world and is self-destructive if taken to its logical conclusions

C. Looking for a point of contact with non-Christians

1. Some argue that reason is the point of contact (Thomas Aquinas)

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<sup>8</sup> David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order*, 218.

- a) Said that we can know certain things about God without revelation
  - b) Can prove God's existence through our natural reasoning powers
  - c) Assumes the neutrality of man's reasoning
2. Others see evidence as the point of contact
- a) Reason from what is observed to what is the most likely explanation
  - b) Assumes the neutrality of man's observations and conclusions
3. The image of God in man is the proper point of contact
- a) Christians have common ground with non-Christians in that both are creatures made in God's image and thereby possess true knowledge of God
  - b) "Reformed theology, as worked out by Calvin and his recent exponents such as Hodge, Warfield, Kuyper, and Bavinck, holds that man's mind is derivative. As such it is naturally in contact with God's revelation. It is surrounded by nothing but revelation. It is itself inherently revelational. It cannot naturally be conscious of itself without being conscious of its creatureliness. For man self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness. Calvin speaks of this as man's inescapable sense of deity."<sup>9</sup>

D. How to engage in conversation with the world

- 1. Consider the presuppositions that lay behind various truth claims
- 2. Point out the inconsistencies in people's thinking (e.g. a person who raises the problem of evil is assuming the existence of some

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<sup>9</sup> Van Til, 90.

objective standard of good)

3. Recognize that every unbelieving position will have within it “borrowed capital” from the Christian position
4. “If the Christian faith is true, then however consistently an unbeliever may appear to be living out his or her position, it cannot hold together. Somewhere there is a flaw, because we do in fact live in God’s world. It may be a flaw of logic, emotion, or simply the irony of unsuccessful pride. The work of the apologist is to uncover the tension between unbelief and the knowledge of God that everyone has.”<sup>10</sup>
5. The exposing of the inconsistencies in other views needs to be followed up by showing how the Christian faith makes better sense of the world

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<sup>10</sup> Edgar, 56.