

Christian Apologetics

Presuppositional Apologetics

Lecture III

October 15, 2015

I. Presuppositions, everybody has them!

- A.** Definition: “A belief or theory which is assumed before the next step in logic is developed. Such a prior postulate often consciously or unconsciously affects the way a person subsequently reasons.” – Francis Schaeffer.
 - 1.** Types of Presuppositions:
 - a.** About God
 - b.** About Creation
 - c.** About Truth
 - d.** About Knowledge
 - e.** About Laws of Nature
 - f.** About Us
 - 2.** These prior commitments affect the interpretation of “facts” and the conclusions drawn from the facts.
- B.** Presuppositions come from our education, the culture around us, our experiences, and our fallen nature.
 - 1.** They may change as circumstances change or new information comes along.
 - 2.** As Christian apologists, we must sometimes challenge the unbeliever’s presuppositions.
 - 3.** As Christian apologists, we must seek to understand, ask appropriately challenging questions, and educate the unbeliever.

II. Apologetics and the Noetic Effects of Sin

- A.** Original Sin
 - 1.** “When we speak of Original Sin, we are not talking about the sin that Adam and Eve committed. Rather, we are talking about the result of that first sin. Original Sin refers to our sinful condition, from which actual sins flow. We sin because we are sinners; we are not sinners because we sin.” – R.C. Sproul, Table Talk, 8/30/90
 - 2.** Original Sin - refers primarily to the moral corruption of human nature common to all human beings.
 - 3.** Aspects of Original Sin
 - a.** Original Guilt - “The guilt of Adam’s sin, committed by him as the federal head of the human race, is imputed to all his descendants.” – Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology
 - b.** Original Pollution - the absence of original righteousness and the presence of positive evil.

- c. Total Depravity - The effect of the fall has impacted every aspect of human life. It doesn't mean that man is as evil as he could be, or that the sinner has no innate knowledge of God, or that man does not recognize goodness when he sees it, or that he engages in every kind of sin. But it does mean that corruption has spread to every part of man's nature and that there is no spiritual good in him in relation to God.
 - d. Total inability - Man is unable to submit to God's holy ordinances. Romans 3 and Romans 8.
 - 4. Therefore, in our natural state, we are unwilling and unable to obey what we know to be God's will. We are unwilling and unable to truly know and understand God and God's creation, including ourselves, and we react to the truth that we do know by suppressing and rejecting it in every aspect of our lives.
 - 5. Because we do this of our own volition, we are without excuse before God and are consequently subject to his wrath.
- B. God is Sovereign over all knowledge.**
- 1. God, as Lord, interprets everything definitively, so when we want to know something, we must seek to think his thought after him.
 - 2. God is not only omnipotent, but also omniscient. He controls all things by his wise plan.

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, ⁸which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight ⁹making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

¹¹In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹²so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. – Ephesians 1:7-12
 - 3. Therefore, he knows all things.
 - a. Hebrews 4:12-13

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.
 - b. 1 John 3:20

For whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything.
 - 4. All of our knowledge, therefore, originates in God.
 - a. Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.
 - b. Colossians 2:8

See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.
 - c. Colossians 2:3

[Christ] in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I say this in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments.

5. When sinners try to gain knowledge without the fear of the Lord, that knowledge is distorted.

a. Romans 1:21-25

²¹ 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. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

b. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

6. This is not to say that every sentence they utter is false. It is to say that their basic worldview is twisted and unreliable. Their most serious epistemological mistake is, typically, to assert their own autonomy: to make themselves, or something other than the Biblical God, the final standard of truth and right.

7. Knowledge, then, is a moral issue.

C. Apologetics and Fallen Man – A Matter of the Heart

1. “Now, it is quite true that the ethical standards of a man do not have a direct bearing on his opinion that 2+2=4 or that the sun rises in the east. But suppose the subject of debate is the existence of a Judge? The debate of whether there is One Who will weigh and evaluate the thoughts and deeds of the sons of men and cast those who hate Him into the outer darkness. Is the lifestyle of the participants really irrelevant? In other words, are the accused qualified to give judgments about the existence of the Judge?” – Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*

2. “The heart of the problem is the heart.

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools. – Romans 1:18-22

3. “A moral problem (refusal to glorify God as God, and refusal to thank God) is the cause of the intellectual problem. It is not the other way around. Our ethical condition cannot be preserved and protected through the intellect. The two are connected, but not in the way Christians have frequently assumed. We are to protect our intellect through our ethical standing before God. The reason unbelievers do not believe has nothing to do with lack of arguments. Rather, their lack of desire to hear the arguments for the truth of Christianity is the result of unbelief.” – Cornelius Van Til
4. “We sometimes approach evangelistic apologetics as though unregenerate men did not love their sin. We speak and act as though an intellectual defense of the faith will somehow impart to the rebellious a desire for holiness. It does not. We argue with them, assuming that they would want to submit to this truth, if only they knew it to be truth. But they do know it is true, and they don’t want to submit to it (Romans 1:28). At this point, many evangelists and apologists may be tempted to walk away in despair. Like Ezekiel, they are uncertain about the efficacy of prophesying to bones.” – Cornelius Van Til
5. “The intellect is insufficient protection for morality. But obedience does protect the intellect. Credo ut intelligam (I believe in order that I may understand—Augustine). If I refuse to believe, then ultimately I am refusing to understand. The testimony of Scripture is that ethical rebellion produces intellectual darkness. It is false to say that we can protect our lives with arguments; rather, we protect the integrity and reliability of argument by how we live our lives. In short, the disobedient will eventually search out arguments that will justify them in their disobedience. Because no such argument can be both true and valid, it will not be long before the rebellious begin to attack the argument (classical) itself, i.e. “false Aristotelian categories, etc.” Christianity is initially rejected in the name of reason, but apart from Christianity, reason collapses into an irrationalism of despair.” – Cornelius Van Til
6. “This is why a revival of godliness will always produce a revival of learning. It does not flow the other way; learning does not produce godliness. Knowledge puffs up. But love builds up, and one of the things it builds up is knowledge. This is also why an abandonment of godliness will eventually destroy learning. The process begins with folly disguised as scholarship and learning, i.e. the folly is festooned with footnotes. Eventually, when the bankruptcy becomes evident to all, then scholarship itself will be denounced.” – Douglas Wilson

III. Van Til – The Father of Modern Presuppositional Apologetics

A. Cornelius Van Til

1. Born in Grootesgast, Holland, the sixth son of Ite Van Til on May 3, 1895, and died April 17, 1987, in Philadelphia, PA.
2. Van Til’s problems with the “Traditional Method” (classical and evidential)
 - a. He thought this method compromised God himself by maintaining that his existence is only “possible” albeit “highly probable,” rather than ontologically and rationally necessary.
 - b. He sought a method that proved “the impossibility of the contrary.”
3. He thought that the old method compromised the revelation of God by:
 - a. Compromising his necessity. It does so by not recognizing that even in Paradise man had to interpret the general (natural) revelation of God in terms of the covenantal obligations placed

upon him through special revelation. Natural revelation, in the traditional view, could be understood “on its own”. Van Til didn’t think so.

- b.** Compromising its clarity. Both the general and special revelation of God are said to be unclear to the point that man can only say that God’s existence is “probable”.
- c.** Compromising its sufficiency. It does this by allowing for an ultimate realm of “chance” out of which might come “facts” such as are wholly new for God and for man. Such “facts” would be uninterpreted and unexplainable in terms of the general or special revelation of God. According to Van Til, the Word of God speaks to everything in creation.
- d.** Compromising its authority. In the traditional method the Word of God’s self-attesting characteristic, with its authority, is secondary to the authority of reason and experience. The Scriptures do not identify themselves, rather man identifies them and recognizes their “authority” only in his own terms.
- e.** It compromises man’s creation as the image of God by thinking of man’s creation and knowledge as independent of the being and knowledge of God. In the traditional approach man need not “think God’s thoughts after him.” Upper story truth by Faith. Lower story truth by reason.
- f.** It compromises man’s covenantal relationship with God by not understanding Adam’s representative action as absolutely determinative of the future. When Adam fell, mankind fell with him.
- g.** It compromises the sinfulness of mankind resulting from the sin of Adam by not understanding man’s ethical depravity as extending to the whole of life, even to his thoughts and attitudes. See above the noetic effects of sin.
- h.** It compromises the grace of God by not understanding it as the necessary prerequisite for “renewal unto knowledge.” In the traditional view, man can and must renew himself unto knowledge by the “right use of reason.”

4. The hard sayings of Van Til

- a.** Nothing can be known unless God is known.
- b.** If we know ourselves, we already know God.
- c.** The existence of God cannot be proven.
- d.** Everything proves the existence of God.
- e.** Christians and Non-Christians have nothing in common.
- f.** Christians and Non-Christians have everything in common.
- g.** The Non-Christian knows nothing.
- h.** The Non-Christian knows God.

B. The Creator-Creator Distinction

- 1.** What do you call everything that exists? Universe? Reality is better.
 - a.** How does God fit into that?
- 2.** Is God a part of the universe? No! A part of reality? Yes.
- 3.** Everything that is, is dualistic—i.e. either God or everything else. This is what Van Til calls the Creator-Creature Distinction.

- a. God condescended to be in a relationship with his creation.
- b. We would know nothing of God himself if God had not first condescended to our level to make himself known.
- c. We wouldn't know God, not because of any limitations of our abilities, but rather because God is **Transcendent** and **Incomprehensible**.
- d. He tells us who he is by 1) general revelation (creation) and 2) by special revelation (Bible)
- e. Don't make God's subcategory of the universe. Monism. One of the fundamental errors of human philosophy.
- f. "In the beginning God created..."
 - God is Sovereign (aseity)
 - God is completely independent.
 - God is triune
 - God created the world "ex Deo"

C. Absolute Ethical Antithesis

1. The conflict in the world: The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of this world.
2. There is no neutrality, either morally or intellectually or any other way.
 - a. "Some theologians 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 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." – John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*.
 - b. "Peter tells us, on the contrary, that the lordship of Jesus (and hence the truth of His word) is our ultimate presupposition. And 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 beyond all others. He calls us to give Him all our loyalty and not allow any other loyalty to compete with Him. 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 is more authoritative? What standard is more clearly known to us? 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 human life. In 1 Corinthians 10:31 we read, 'Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.' Our Lord's demand upon us is comprehensive. In all that we do, we must seek to please Him. No area of human life is neutral." – John Frame.
3. By "absolute" Van Til meant the opposite of relative.
4. By "ethical" Van Til is not speaking of *ethics* per se, but rather that this antithesis is a **religious antithesis**.
5. By "antithesis" Van Til means that there is always and everywhere opposition and conflict.

D. Points of Contact

1. Distinguishing between “common ground.” Reason
2. Given the Absolute Ethical Antithesis, what do we have in common with the unbeliever: Nothing and Everything. Knowledge must be contained in a structure of understanding.
3. The unbeliever sifts every bit of information, observation, or “data” through an unbelieving grid so that the interpretation of that information carries with it unbelief. We don’t agree about anything, really.
4. But, the believer and the unbeliever have everything in common with respect to who they are.
 - a. Both are created in the image of God, living in God’s created world, breathing his air, eating his food.
 - b. In covenant with God, in that he has revealed himself to them and they are accountable to him with respect to what they know.
 - c. The unbeliever is a walking contradiction. Living in God’s world while denying that there is a God. Inevitable tension exists in the unbeliever’s life.
 - d. Epistemologically: nothing in common.
 - e. Metaphysically, everything in common.

IV. Conversation with the World

A. The Transcendental Approach (Presuppositional)

1. Given any fact or any experience, the Christian asks, “What are the presuppositions behind that fact and which make that fact possible?”
 - a. It is the responsibility of the Christian to think through what the non-Christian is really saying.
 - b. Everybody is a philosopher because everybody has their own presuppositions about being a creature of God and who that God is.
 - c. Examples in the Bahnsen-Stein debate.
2. When we are able to understand the presuppositions of that person, you can then begin to understand what’s going on in their life.
 - a. Remember that not all unbelievers think alike.
 - b. There are different kinds of unbelief.
3. An Ad Hominem Approach (to the man and yet universal)
 - a. It takes time. Talk to them.
 - b. Find out what are their “points of tension.”
 - c. It’s a relational approach
4. What are the big issue “Points of Tension”?
 - a. Moral
 - b. Metaphysical
 - c. Epistemological
 - d. Intensely Personal – Man was not made to live apart from God.