

AN INTRODUCTION TO PRESUPPOSITIONAL  
 APOLOGETICS  
 Ian Hugh Clary<sup>1</sup>

The apostle Paul was quite unlike the modern tourist when he wandered the streets of Athens in Acts 17. As he absorbed the bustle of the *polis*, the magnificent sights of Mount Olympus or the Parthenon did not captivate him. Instead of standing awestruck at the surrounding culture, Paul was “greatly upset” because he saw that the city was “full of idols” (Acts 17:16). Athens was a place of tremendous learning. It was home to a number of schools of philosophy such as Epicureanism and Stoicism (Acts 17:18).<sup>2</sup> It was also a city of religion. Pagan spirituality flourished in the melting pot of religious pluralism. In the diversity of philosophical and religious thought, Paul witnessed what could easily be called “pre-modern post-modernism.”

There is great affinity between the west of the twenty-first century and the Athens of Paul’s experience. Gone are the days of Christendom, where most European and North American countries were generally Christian.<sup>3</sup> In the post-modern west, religion is becoming just as diverse as it was in Greco-Roman society. In a city like Toronto Sikh temples stand as tall as Christian churches and Islamic mosques. One could just as easily take a university course on Wicca or atheist philosophy as they could on Reformation history.

How does Christianity fair in light of this multiplicity of philosophical and religious thought? In what way can Christianity answer the challenges posed by post-modernism and religious pluralism? As a worldview that makes an exclusive truth claim in

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Hugh Clary is a graduate student at Toronto Baptist Seminary and Pastoral Intern at Grace Baptist Church.

<sup>2</sup> A good introduction to Greek philosophy is John M. Frame, “Greeks Bearing Gifts” in W. Andrew Hoffercker ed., *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), 1-36. A more detailed examination can be found in Gordon H. Clark, *Ancient Philosophy* (Hobbs, New Mexico: The Trinity Foundation, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the changes in western thought see Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?: The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976).

the gospel of Jesus Christ, is there a method of commending and defending the faith in the midst of a relativistic culture?

There is a need for an apologetic method that not only dismantles unbelieving thought in all of its forms, but also offers Christianity as the only worldview that gives meaning to the world.<sup>4</sup> The following essay will present the presuppositional method of apologetics as that which soundly defeats non-Christian faith while offering a meaningful alternative. This essay will first answer the question, “What is apologetics?” It will provide a basic exposition of the discipline and trace the various schools of apologetic thought. Secondly, it will examine the role that Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) played in the development of the presuppositional method. Finally, a brief survey of presuppositionalism as an apologetic strategy will be put forward, highlighting key distinctives that mark it as a unique and biblical method.

### The Task of Apologetics

John M. Frame explains that there are three aspects to apologetics. First, apologetics is proof; it presents a rational basis for the Christian faith and proves it to be true (cf. John 14:11). Second, apologetics is defense; it answers the challenges of unbelief (cf. Phil. 1:7). Third, apologetics is offense; it attacks the foolishness of unbelief (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16).<sup>5</sup> In addition to this tripartite understanding of apologetics William Edgar adds that commending the faith is just as important as defending it.<sup>6</sup> Therefore the command to evangelize is integral to apologetics. “Evangelism and apologetics are seamlessly linked and together function under the rubric of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20).”<sup>7</sup>

There has been a need for apologetics since the inception of the church.<sup>8</sup> 1 Peter 3:15 makes the point clear as does a cursory reading

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<sup>4</sup> This is what is referred to as “negative” and “positive” apologetics Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1988), 14-16.

<sup>5</sup> Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> William Edgar, *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Hugh Clary, “Apologetics: Commending and Defending” in *The Evangelical Baptist* (Fall 2005): 10.

<sup>8</sup> One would argue that apologetics has been necessary since the fall.

of Paul's missionary journeys in the book of Acts (see Acts 17:16-34). Apologetics played a major role in patristic history where examples can be drawn from a myriad of sources.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-c. 107) argued against docetic understandings of Christ;<sup>10</sup> Justin Martyr (c. 100-c. 165) penned *Dialogue with Trypho* (c. 155) arguing for the veracity of the incarnation against Jewish presuppositions;<sup>11</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-c. 200) wrote *Against Heresies* (c. 175-185) listing and critiquing a wide variety of Gnostic teaching;<sup>12</sup> and Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote a definitive work against paganism in the massive *The City of God Against the Pagans* (416-422).<sup>13</sup>

Once Christianity became the dominant worldview in the west, apologetics took a less prominent role. The major apologetic example from the medieval church is Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274) who incorporated Aristotelianism in his writings against Islamic philosophy, particularly in parts of *Summa Contra Gentiles* (c. 1258-1264).<sup>14</sup> It was not until the Renaissance that the apologetic task assumed a more prominent role. One thinks, for instance, of the debates of the Protestant Reformation and orthodox interactions with various heretical positions such as Socinianism and Unitarianism. But even so, most apologetic interface took place within a general (Christian) theistic perspective. Only after the Enlightenment did the need to defend theism generally and Christianity in particular arise.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent sample of patristic apologetics see Michael A. G. Haykin, *Defence of the Truth: Contending for the Faith Yesterday and Today* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Ignatius, "The Letters" in *The Apostolic Fathers The Fathers of the Church Volume One: A New Translation* (New York: CIMA Publishing Co., 1947), 83-130.

<sup>11</sup> Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho" in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr The Fathers of the Church Volume Six: A New Translation* (New York: CIMA Publishing Co., 1948), 139-368.

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus, "Against Heresies" in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume One: The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 309-602.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans* Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought ed., R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Peter J. Leithart, "Medieval Theology and the Roots of Modernity" in W. Andrew Hoffercker ed., *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), 140-177. For relevant section on Aquinas see 156-167.

<sup>15</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *Thales to Dewey* (1957; rpr. Hobbs, New Mexico: The Trinity Foundation, 1997), 301-394.

With the birth of continental rationalism and British empiricism came direct attacks on Christianity as a system from outside of the faith. Well known examples can be seen in the writings of Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) and David Hume (1711-1776) whose teaching severely undermined the Christian religion.<sup>16</sup>

In the history of Christian thought, three broad schools of apologetics have arisen to answer Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment challenges.<sup>17</sup> They are, in no particular order, evidentialism, classical apologetics and presuppositionalism.<sup>18</sup>

The first school, evidentialism, is a perspective based upon an empirical epistemology. This scientifically oriented school appropriates *a posteriori* arguments for Christianity in a piecemeal fashion that include proofs for the resurrection, the reliability of the biblical documents and the possibility of miracles. Apologists in the evidentialist perspective include Thomas Reid, Bishop Butler, C.S. Lewis, Josh McDowell, Lee Strobel, Gary Habermas and John W. Montgomery.

The second school is commonly known as classical apologetics and is based upon a rationalist epistemology and natural theology. It is a philosophical apologetic that uses *a priori* arguments from causality and design as well as the ontological argument. Apologists from a classical standpoint include Aquinas, B.B. Warfield, William Lane Craig, Ravi Zacharias, William Dembski, R. C. Sproul and John Gerstner.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Alister McGrath traces atheism from its origins in the French Revolution to the present in Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (London: Galilee, 2006). For the relationship between the Enlightenment and Christianity see W. Andrew Hoffercker, "Enlightenments and Awakenings: The Beginning of Modern Culture Wars" in W. Andrew Hoffercker ed., *Revolutions in Worldview: Understanding the Flow of Western Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), 240-280.

<sup>17</sup> With globalism and religious pluralism other faiths such as Islam and Hinduism require some apologetic interaction as well. A recent example is Timothy Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting that the evidential and classical approaches share enough affinity in their understanding of the nature of man and his ability to reason since the fall that they could be categorised under a general evidentialist rubric with a distinction between hard and soft evidentialism.

<sup>19</sup> A basic explanation and defence of classical apologetics is R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1984). For a review see Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 219-243.

The third school is known as presuppositionalism and is based upon a revelational epistemology and Reformed argument for the veracity of the Christian worldview. It presents Christian theology as a unit, with the Scripture as its presupposed starting point. Using the bible as their authority, presuppositionalists argue for the existence of God transcendently. Such apologists in the presuppositionalist camp include Van Til, Greg L. Bahnsen, John M. Frame, Joe Boot and K. Scott Oliphint. Others often categorized as presuppositional are Gordon H. Clark, Edward J. Carnell and Francis Schaeffer.

## Presuppositionalism: A Beginning

Many schools of thought have a founder and presuppositionalism is no different. In the history of western philosophy, the commencement of various philosophical schools can be credited to the work of one or two industrious thinkers. For instance, René Descartes (1596-1650) is generally credited with founding Continental rationalism and John Locke (1632-1704) with British empiricism. In the discipline of Christian apologetics the thinker generally recognized as “founding” presuppositionalism is the Dutch-American theologian Cornelius Van Til.<sup>20</sup> Van Til was heavily influenced in his thinking by the writings of Kuyper and Bavinck as well as Warfield, Geerhardus Vos and for a time Herman Dooyeweerd. It has been rightly said that Van Til took the best of Kuyper and Warfield and blended them into a Reformed apologetic.<sup>21</sup> The Van Til *corpus* consists mainly of published course syllabi, though his major scholarly contribution is undoubtedly *The Defense of the Faith* where he outlines the basic principles for apologetics.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For more information on the life of Cornelius Van Til see John Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2008); Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing Co., 1998), 7-20; John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing Co., 1995), 19-37; and William White Jr., *Van Til: Defender of the Faith* (Nashville/New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 596-612. For Van Til's own view of “Amsterdam and Old Princeton” see Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing Co., 1967), 260-299.

<sup>22</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* The Cornelius Van Til Collection (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1967). A bibliography of Van Til's writings is available in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 735-740. Van Til's works are available in electronic format from Logos Bible Software (<http://www.logos.com/vantil>).

## Presuppositionalism: Some Basic Tenets

What makes Van Tilian presuppositionalism distinct from the other apologetic schools? If presuppositionalism seeks to make proper sense of the evidence for Christian theism, is it not just a form of evidentialism? If it reasons *a priori* from God's existence, is it not another form of classical apologetics? The following will outline four basic tenets that explain why the presuppositional method is distinct from others. This list is not exhaustive, but will hopefully provide an adequate basis for understanding what one writer has called "kung-fu" apologetics.<sup>23</sup> The four basic tenets are: 1) antithesis; 2) point of contact; 3) ultimate commitment; and, 4) transcendental argument.<sup>24</sup> The fourth point constitutes Van Til's most unique contribution to discussions of apologetic methodology.

### Antithesis

In 1 Corinthians 2:14 the apostle Paul makes a distinction between the natural person and the spiritual person. In his discussion of the natural person, the descriptive term that he uses is *psuchikos* a Greek word that means "an unspiritual person, one who merely functions bodily, without being touched by the Spirit of God."<sup>25</sup> The spiritual person, on the other hand, is described as *pneumatikos* meaning that he or she "possesses the divine pneu/ma...this enables the person to penetrate the divine mysteries."<sup>26</sup> The relationship between the two is like that of black and white; they are in antithesis to one another.

The word antithesis comes from the combination of two Greek words *anti* "against"<sup>27</sup> and *tithemi* "to put or place in a particular location."<sup>28</sup> The root of *tithemi* is *thes* and is where we get the word

<sup>23</sup> Grover Gunn, *Lectures on Apologetics* (Greenville, South Carolina: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1997), 41.

<sup>24</sup> More issues could be addressed such as the rational/irrational tension, aseity, Trinitarianism, the relation of faith and philosophy, creation, etc. Space constraints require that these be left relatively ignored.

<sup>25</sup> BDAG, 1100b.

<sup>26</sup> BDAG, 837b.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Friberg, Timothy Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2000), 2262. "Originally with a local sense *over against, opposite.*"

<sup>28</sup> BDAG, 1003b.

“thesis” from. Bob and Maxine Moore explain, “The antithesis of something is its opposite, reverse, negation, or antipode.”<sup>29</sup> Explaining the theological significance of antithesis, Gary DeMar, summarizing Greg Bahnsen, says, “As Christians we must recognize the fundamental disagreement between biblical thought and all forms of unbelief at the foundational level of our theory of knowing and knowledge.”<sup>30</sup> Frame explains that the antithesis between believer and unbeliever is “the most conspicuous feature of Van Til’s position.”<sup>31</sup>

The notion of antithesis is reflected in Scripture, as seen in the 1 Corinthians 2:14 passage noted above. Paul could ask in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16 what relation does righteousness have with lawlessness, or light with darkness? Here, Paul likely builds on the teaching of Jesus in Mark 9:40 who said, “For the one who is not against us is for us.” And of course, the antithesis can be traced all the way back to the garden of Eden after the fall where God said to Satan in Genesis 3:15 that he would put enmity between he and the woman, between his offspring and hers.

In the patristic period, the antithesis between believing and unbelieving thought is apparent. Take for instance Tertullian’s (c. 160-c. 225) famous question in chapter seven of *The Prescriptions against the Heretics* (c. 200), “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?”<sup>32</sup> Likewise Augustine pits Christianity against paganism by distinguishing the city of God from the city of man in *City of God*.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, the one theologian who most influenced Van Til’s teaching on the antithesis was the Dutch statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920). James E. McGoldrick explains Kuyper’s view of the antithesis, “At a time when modernists were promoting a theology of synthesis, Kuyper emphasized the antithesis that posits an impassable gap

<sup>29</sup> Bob Moore and Maxine Moore, *NTC’s Dictionary of Latin and Greek Origins: A Comprehensive Guide to the Classical Origins of English Words* (Chicago, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1997), 320.

<sup>30</sup> Gary DeMar ed., *Pushing the Antithesis: The Apologetic Methodology of Greg L. Bahnsen* (Powder Springs, Georgia: American Vision, 2007), 13.

<sup>31</sup> John M. Frame, *Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1995), 187.

<sup>32</sup> Tertullian, “The Prescriptions against the Heretics” in S.L. Greenslade ed., *Early Latin Theology: Selections from Tertullian, Cyprian, Ambrose and Jerome* The Library of Christian Classics (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>33</sup> See footnote 15 above.

between God and Satan, between Christ and Anti-Christ, a conflict of cosmic dimensions, and he called Christians to wage a struggle against all compromises of truth in every area of life and learning. He summoned them to become part of a counter-offensive against all forms of falsehood and in so doing to confront evil with the gospel of divine mercy and grace, which Christ bestows on all who leave the kingdom of Satan and enter the diametrically opposed kingdom of God.”<sup>34</sup>

Following in the footsteps of Kuyper, and J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937) whose contrast between Christianity and liberalism was also influential,<sup>35</sup> Van Til made the antithesis one of the hallmarks of his apologetic. For Van Til, the fundamental difference between the believer and the unbeliever is ethical.<sup>36</sup> The unbeliever, having not experienced the saving grace of God in the gospel, is dead in trespasses and sin (Eph. 2:1), thus certain epistemological consequences result. For instance, in the words of the apostle Paul unbelievers have become “futile” in their thoughts and their “senseless hearts were darkened” (Rom. 1:21). This is so because they suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18b) and exchange the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25). Sin’s negative impact on the mind is what theologians call the “noetic effects of sin.” Van Til explains, “When we say that sin is ethical we do not mean, however, that sin involved only the will of man and not also his intellect. Sin involved every aspect of man’s personality. All of man’s reactions in every relation in which God had set him were ethical and not merely intellectual; the intellect itself is ethical.”<sup>37</sup> The results of the noetic effects of sin are “that man tried to interpret everything with which he came into contact without reference to God.”<sup>38</sup>

The Christian, on the other hand, has been set free from the bonds of sin and has a new way of viewing the world. He or she has been “clothed with the new man” and is “being renewed in knowledge according to the image of the one who created it” (Col.

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<sup>34</sup> James E. McGoldrick, *Abraham Kuyper: God’s Renaissance Man* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2000), 142.

<sup>35</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1923).

<sup>36</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 171.

<sup>37</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 46.

<sup>38</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 47.

3:10). Thus, being renewed in their minds (Romans 12:2), the Christian can rightly interpret the world that God made. The indwelling of the Spirit and freedom from sin allows the Christian to “think God’s thoughts after him.” The knowledge that the believer has of God has an ethical impact. Bahnsen explains, “As man’s knowledge of God’s increases, his sense of distance does not diminish, but actually increases. He stands in even greater awe and wonder at God’s mind. He is humbled even more than when he began to learn of Him.”<sup>39</sup> Therefore, according to Van Til, the presuppositional method recognizes the issues at stake and offers a powerful defense/offense for the Christian faith. “In the all-out war between the Christian and the natural man as he appears in modern garb it is only the atomic energy of a truly Reformed methodology that will explode the last *Festung*.”<sup>40</sup>

### Point of Contact

Many who misunderstand Van Til on antithesis often charge him with teaching that there is no point of contact between the believer and the unbeliever. Because of this supposed lack of common ground, the misconception is that presuppositionalism offers no rational argumentation and advises the apologist only to preach the gospel without remonstrance. However, Van Til does see a point of contact and therefore does believe that an interchange can occur between the believer and unbeliever.

The evidential and classical schools of apologetics place point of contact in natural theology. It is generally held that Van Til was misguided in his appropriation of natural theology saying, “All denials of these assumptions are forced and temporary.”<sup>41</sup> What is often not recognized is that for Van Til, natural theology must always be conditioned by the greater context of theology. According to Jeffrey K. Jue, “This context would identify the function of and relation between natural theology and supernatural theology in the pre- and

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<sup>39</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 231.

<sup>40</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 105.

<sup>41</sup> Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 72.

post-fall environment.”<sup>42</sup> Because the unbeliever’s problem is ethical, which in turn has a negative epistemological result: he or she is at odds with the truth of biblical revelation. Yet, the apologist does have recourse to appeal to the unbeliever on a metaphysical level. The common ground between the Christian and non-Christian is ontological.<sup>43</sup> This not only makes sense existentially, but also has biblical support.

Experientially, the non-Christian lives in God’s world and is confronted daily with general revelation. God’s revelation is clear whether an unbeliever observes creation from the farthest galaxy to the smallest cell. The apostle Paul makes this point in Romans 1:20 when he says that God’s invisible attributes—his eternal power and divine nature—are “clearly seen” in the created order.

Alongside revelation in the external world, the unbeliever internally has an experience of God: in conscience. Immediate knowledge of God, since conception, renders the unbeliever without excuse.<sup>44</sup> This knowledge is a result of the unbeliever bearing the image of God and the implanted *sensus deitatis*.<sup>45</sup> Paul says in Romans 1:21 that unbelievers “know God” but do not glorify him. Therefore every apologetic appeal is to something already known by the unbeliever. If by God’s grace that knowledge is brought to remembrance, then conversion occurs. However, if the unbeliever continues in hardness of heart, the apologist has still accomplished his or her task of showing the unbeliever that deep down inside, they truly know God. This only furthers unbelievers’ responsibility to believe.

### Ultimate Commitment

The question of authority is a controversial aspect of Van Til’s thought. Christian and non-Christian alike have been critical of his

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<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey K. Jue, “*Theologia Naturalis*: A Reformed Tradition” in K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Lipton eds., *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), 169.

<sup>43</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 90-95.

<sup>44</sup> See Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* In Defense of Biblical Christianity Volume V (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), 195.

<sup>45</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 90.

view that Scripture is the primary authority to be appealed to by the apologist in his or her task of defending the faith. According to both the non-presuppositionalist Christian and the unbeliever, to assume the authority of the bible at the outset of an apologetic engagement is to involve oneself in the fallacy of circular reasoning. It is argued that Scripture is one of the key issues under scrutiny and that it first needs to be proven that it is the authoritative word of God before it can be appealed to.

What both the evidentialist and the non-Christian do not seem to recognize is that when it comes to issues of ultimate authority, everyone has an unproved starting point that is self-referential and taken to be self-attesting. “Every philosophy must use its own standards in proving its conclusions; otherwise, it is simply inconsistent.”<sup>46</sup> Bahnsen adds, “The Christian apologist simply recognizes that the *ultimate truth*—that which is more pervasive, fundamental, and necessary—is such that it cannot be argued *independently* of the preconditions inherent in it.”<sup>47</sup> The real issue comes down to justifying one’s starting point. Can the non-Christian substantiate their autonomous reason as a legitimate and rational epistemic foundation? To do so, he or she must first assume reason before it can be proven to be a justifiable authority. This is what Van Til called a “vicious circle.” He could also say, “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, method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another.”<sup>48</sup>

Frame distinguishes between “narrowly circular” and “broadly circular” arguments. When arguing for the truthfulness of the biblical worldview the apologist does not resort to saying, “The Bible is true; therefore the Bible is true.” This is a “narrowly circular” argument and while it is accurate, there is more to the issue. The bible assumes its own authority (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16), but it also demonstrates that authority transcendently because of the impossibility of the contrary. This is a “broadly circular” argument. It is the demonstration of the

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<sup>46</sup> John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1994), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacogdoches, Texas: Covenant Media Foundation, 2000), 75.

<sup>48</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 101. Emphasis his.

bible's truth claims by appeal to evidence.<sup>49</sup> For the world to make sense, the bible must be true. If it is not true, then nothing can be known. The bible provides the necessary preconditions for intelligibility in the world. While biblical revelation is the epistemic authority for the believer, it is also authoritative for the unbeliever who regularly borrows from the biblical worldview to make sense of things.

If God's revelation is the source of all meaning, then it is necessary for it to be presupposed even to make sense of the discussion between the Christian and non-Christian over authority. In Psalm 36:9 the Psalmist declares, "In your light do we see light." This is true for the believer and the non-believer. Van Til says, "Scripture presents itself as being the only light in terms of which the truth about facts and their relations can be discovered."<sup>50</sup> According to Bahnsen,

God's revelation is more than the best foundation for Christian reasoning; it is the only philosophically sound foundation for any reasoning whatsoever. Therefore, although the world in its own wisdom sees the word of Christ as foolishness, 'The foolishness of God is wiser than men' (1 Cor. 1:18, 25). Christians need not sit in an isolated philosophical tower, reduced to simply despising the philosophical systems of non-Christians. No, by taking every thought captive to Christ, we are enabled to cast down reasoning that is exalted against the knowledge of God (cf. 2 Cor. 10:5). We must challenge the unbeliever to give a cogent and credible account of how he knows anything whatsoever, given his espoused presuppositions about reality, truth and man (his 'worldview').<sup>51</sup>

## Transcendental Argument

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<sup>49</sup> Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 14. Other external evidences can also be appealed to such as the reliability of the biblical text, the early dates of the manuscripts, etc. Frame says, "Circularity...can be as broad as the whole universe; for every fact witnesses to the truth of God." See also Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 75.

<sup>50</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 108.

<sup>51</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 5.

Van Til once wrote, “At the outset it ought to be clearly observed that very system of thought necessarily has a certain method of its own.”<sup>52</sup> For Van Til, the only cogent method of apologetics, from the Christian perspective, is the transcendental method.<sup>53</sup> The most significant contribution that Van Til made to apologetics, what has been called a contribution of Copernican dimensions,<sup>54</sup> is the “transcendental argument” for the existence of God. The following will seek to explain the transcendental argument as an apologetic method.

Transcendental arguments are not unknown in the history of philosophy and have been used from the early Greeks to Immanuel Kant.<sup>55</sup> Van Til, however, took the idea and placed it within a Christian worldview by applying it to the existence of God. A transcendental argument asks the question, “What are the preconditions necessary for the intelligibility of reality?” This argument is an “indirect argument” that while not appealing to explicit evidences or arguments from natural theology, does seek to prove that such arguments only make sense within a Christian framework of interpretation.

Don Collett notes two ways in which the transcendental method safeguards important theological concerns. First, the transcendental method “safeguards the doctrine of God’s transcendence.”<sup>56</sup> It does so by taking seriously God’s absolute character of being when posing an argument for Christianity. Traditional methods of apologetics, that assume principles of deduction or induction, make the existence of God “logically derivative” rather than “logically primitive.”<sup>57</sup> Because the

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<sup>52</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 4-5.

<sup>53</sup> Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 10-13.

<sup>54</sup> John M. Frame, “The Problem of Theological Paradox” in Gary North ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective* (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1979), 295.

<sup>55</sup> For more on transcendental arguments see Charles Taylor, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments” in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 20-33.

<sup>56</sup> Don Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument” in K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Lipton eds., *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2007), .260.

<sup>57</sup> Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument,” 260.

transcendental method starts with God as the necessary precondition for intelligibility, his “logically primitive” and “absolute” character is preserved.<sup>58</sup>

Second, the transcendental method “alone does justice to the clarity of the objective evidence for God’s existence.”<sup>59</sup> Because the existence of God makes argumentation possible, his existence is necessary; it cannot be falsified. By starting with premises in the world, the evidential schools allow for the possibility of God’s non-existence. In the transcendental method, however, the argument from predication rules out such a possibility. The argument from predication is based upon the premise “that predication requires for its possibility the necessary truth of God’s existence...precluding any future possibility of using argument to falsify God’s existence.”<sup>60</sup>

Van Til taught a two-fold method of apologetic strategy that is well expressed in Proverbs 26:4-5, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you yourself also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own estimation.” Verse 4 argues against the idea of neutrality, explaining that if one permitted the unbeliever their most basic premises the apologetic task is lost. Verse 5 in turn requires the apologist to assume the unbeliever’s worldview, “for the sake of argument” in order to perform an “internal critique” or *reductio ad absurdum*, to demonstrate its irrationality. This, in essence, encapsulates the transcendental method, from the Van Til perspective.<sup>61</sup>

In syllogistic form a transcendental argument looks like this:

Premise 1: For X to be the case, Y would have to be the case, because Y is a precondition of X.

Premise 2: X is the case.

Conclusion: Y is the case.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument,” 261.

<sup>59</sup> Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument,” 262.

<sup>60</sup> Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument,” 262.

<sup>61</sup> Collett, “Van Til and Transcendental Argument,” 262-263. See also Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 61.

<sup>62</sup> Adapted from Stephen Wellum’s course-notes for Apologetics 323, Toronto Baptist Seminary, Winter 2008.

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To work this out in terms of God's existence the argument would look like this:

Premise 1: For there to be intelligibility in the world, God must exist because God is a precondition for intelligibility.

Premise 2: There is intelligibility in the world.

Conclusion: God exists.

What is especially devastating for the non-believer is that for he or she to even deny the existence of God, he must first be presupposed. Take for example:

A presupposes B if and only if:

a) if A is true, then B is true

b) if  $\neg A$  is true, then B is true.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, God's existence (B) is the necessary precondition for both the affirmation (A) and negation ( $\neg A$ ) of God's existence. The existence of God is thus an inescapable concept. In Van Til's words, "It is the firm conviction of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that not one human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or affirmation, unless it were for God's existence." Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have, in order to be what it is."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Adapted from Collett, "Van Til and Transcendental Argument," 269.

<sup>64</sup> Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11.

## Conclusion

However brief, this essay has sought to explain the nature of presuppositionalism and the basic tenets that make it a unique contribution to the discussion of apologetics. It is hoped that the method developed by Cornelius Van Til and expounded by his followers will come to direct the playing field of apologetic methodology. Such a discussion, however, is important for more than just methodological considerations. The church in the twenty-first-century is again facing a barrage of intellectual challenges from a multiplicity of faith commitments. The recent spate of publications from the so-called “New Atheism” is a case in point.<sup>65</sup> Presuppositional apologetics is a consistently biblical apologetic that offers a comprehensive critique of non-Christian thought without compromising the Christian worldview. Therefore it poses an indomitable challenge of its own. Van Til best summarizes the challenge: “There is a global war on between Christ and Satan. All men are participants in this war. They all wear uniforms; they are all for or against God...But those who fight for truth must fight with spiritual weapons only. Their opposition to Satan is in the interest of winning converts to the love of God in Christ.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> For a good example of how presuppositionalism can be used in a discussion with an atheist see Christopher Hitchens and Douglas Wilson, *Is Christianity Good for the World? A Debate* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2008).

<sup>66</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 209.