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Biblical Authority and Apologetics

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Introduction

One only needs to survey the Christian book market to see the various approaches to apologetics. There are the classical, evidential, presuppositional and amalgams of the three. As one reads through the evidential approach to apologetics, the emphasis on historical data and events become central and authoritative, yet little is mentioned about the importance of Scripture except for a few proof texts. The historical data becomes the authority in the evidential methodology. In the classical approach, one reads about the importance of philosophical categories and reason in the defense and promotion of the Christian faith. Thus, philosophy and rationalism become the authority in the classical apologetic methodological approach. These approaches would not outright deny biblical authority, but they do practically deny biblical authority in their methodological approaches. Whatever source one uses to prove one's belief system is the authority, whether one acknowledges the bible as the authority or not.

The current evangelical milieu does a great deal of emoting the importance of the Holy Scriptures as the primary source of Christian authority on matters dealing with faith and practice, but in their practical lives, they merely ascent to this foundational truth. The problem is further exacerbated by the Christian leaders in the broader evangelical landscape that openly deny the importance of certain aspects of the authority of Scripture, such as the validity and significance of the Old Testament in believer's lives, thereby cutting off Christians from the redemptive-historical nature and foundation of Christianity. Namely, that Jesus was crucified, died, was buried and on the third day rose *in accordance with the Scriptures*. The Scriptures that the apostles were continually referring to were the Old Testament documents.

The importance of biblical authority in apologetics is foundational. One cannot defend Christian truth unless they are steeped in Christian truth. The Scriptures are the foundation of all Christian truth. Therefore, any system of apologetics built upon any other foundation is not promoting a sufficient panoramic view of Christian verity and doctrine but sets itself up as the foundation of the Christian worldview. Thus, the only method appropriate for apologetics is one that gives preeminence to biblical authority.

In the area of apologetics, the Bible is given much reverence in theory, but in practice, it is left behind to gather dust. John Frame sees this dilemma in much of Christian academia when he writes:

We may not lay our faith aside when we study God's world. Unfortunately, many enter institutions of higher education thinking they may honor God on Sunday while accepting all the standards of secular scholarship in their daily studies. That is not bringing every thought captive to Christ. The Christian must have a critical perspective on scholarship, testing every hypothesis by Scripture.¹

It is the capitulation to the secular worldview and worldly ideologies that are the foundation of many other apologetic methodological approaches. The presuppositional (or covenantal) approach places the Scriptures in the center of the methodology.

Now, this is where much clarity is needed. The Scripture reveals the mind, will, and character of God. Cornelius Van Til calls to mind that only God has "self-contained"

¹ John Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, eds. Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 248.

knowledge, and man's knowledge is "derivative."² The Second London Baptist Confession points out that:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience to him as their creator, yet they could never have attained the reward of life but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.³

The only way that man could understand the mind, will and character of God is if God "condescends" to His creation and image-bearers. The Triune God of Scripture has revealed Himself in nature, or by general revelation, as the Psalmist writes:

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard. Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them, he has set a tent for the sun (Psa. 19:1-4 ESV)

The apostle Paul also confirms this truth, saying:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. *For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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.* (Rom 1:18-20 ESV *Italics added*)

God's condescension to His image-bearers is to reveal His mind, will, and character, yet the events in Genesis 3 has caused all men to be in rebellion and a state of covenant breaking through Adam's fall, thereby causing us, as the previous verse points out, to "suppress the truth" in unrighteousness.

Therefore, we need a superseding revelation, one that reveals God's mind, will, and character directly to God's covenant people. This superseding revelation is the Scriptures as contained in what is now called the Old and New Testament. God's special revelation that precisely states His mind, will and character is the authority for the church in all matters of life and doctrine. The Scriptures are replete with their importance:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa. 55:10-11 ESV)

² Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publications, 2003), 31-32.

³ *Second London Baptist Confession of 1689* ch.7, section 1.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17 ESV)

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. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:12-13 ESV)

The importance of founding the apologetic methodological approach on Scripture cannot be exaggerated. The presuppositional model places the onus of authority in matters dealing with the defense of the faith on the revealed mind, will and character of God, namely Scripture.

The presuppositional model immediately causes the opponents of this methodological approach to start waving their strawmen. What presuppositionalism is not saying is that there are not benefits in understanding foundational aspects as revealed in nature. Language, math, art, science, and philosophy, among many other things, are natural revelation, for, without an understanding of these aspects of creation, we cannot understand the Scriptures rightly. There is a reciprocity, though. The Scriptures help correct and accurately interpret nature. Not only this, the Scriptures are the sole authority for the church universal, which has been confessed from the apostles, Apostolic Fathers, and the Reformation forward. The presuppositional apologist understands these truths and applies them to their apologetic methodological approach.

The Nature of Biblical Authority

When discussing biblical authority, it is necessary to distinguish between authority as the standard or rule that God has given to His covenant people for faith and practice and biblical authority as the expressive power by which God accomplishes all His redemptive, salvific and sovereign purposes. The former deals with the standard by which the believer is to understand the mind, will and character of God and the latter is the vitality that the Scriptures have, as used by the Holy Spirit, to fulfill those purposes.

Biblical Authority as Standard

The Scriptures are the rule of faith and practice to all of God's covenant people throughout the world. The church has been through periods that have either supplanted biblical authority with ecclesiastical authority, as with the Roman Catholic Church, or have not had the means or access to the Scriptures in their languages, which caused confusion and liberality. One of the greatest blessings of the Reformation was the recovery of biblical authority. The Second London Baptist, a confession fashioned out of the Reformation, states that:

The Holy Scripture is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience, although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of

God, as to leave men inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and his will which is necessary unto salvation.⁴

And,

The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit, into which Scripture so delivered, our faith is finally resolved.⁵

The Reformation brought back to the church a high esteem for the Scriptures, understanding that the Scriptures are the only standard for the church.

The Scriptures give this testimony of themselves, also. The apostle Paul was concerned with training His young disciple Timothy for his own commission. Doing so, Paul exhorts Timothy:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Tim. 3:16-17 ESV)

Here, the apostle Paul is not only exhorting Timothy for the work of ministry, but he is declaring the standard by which that ministry was to be conducted. Paul states that all Scriptures are “θεόπνευστος,” or “breathed out by God.” As one goes to the Greek dictionary *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, the brief entry points the reader to Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield’s work “God-inspired Scripture.”⁶ Warfield interacts with various interpretations for “θεόπνευστος” that were popular at the time. Warfield concludes that:

What is θεόπνευστος is “God-breathed,” produced by the creative breath of the Almighty. And Scripture is called θεόπνευστος in order to designate it as “God-breathed,” the product of Divine spiration, the creation of that Spirit who is all spheres of the Divine activity, the executive of the Godhead... What it affirms is that the Scriptures owe their origin to an activity of God the Holy Ghost and are in the highest and truest sense His creation. It is on this foundation of Divine origin that all the high attributes of Scripture are built.⁷

As Warfield acknowledges, the “foundation of Divine origin” is the foundation of the authority of Scripture. It is on this foundation that “all controversies of religion are to be determined.”⁸ Not only this, the Scriptures are the only foundation of the church in matters of “all saving knowledge, faith, and obedience.”⁹

⁴ *Second London Baptist Confession of 1689*, ch. 1, section 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, section 10.

⁶ “θεόπνευστος,” BAGD, 356.

⁷ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publications, 1970), 296.

⁸ *Second Baptist Confession of 1689* ch. 1, section 10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, section 1.

Biblical Authority as Demonstrative Power

The Scriptures being “θεόπνευστος” not only are the standard by which the church is to understand their faith and practice, they are the demonstrative power by which God the Holy Spirit uses to apply the work of Christ to believers, convict and convince sinners of the reality of God and the necessity of faith and repentance. One needs to look at creation to understand what God is doing in “re-creation” or fulfilling in redemptive history. Genesis begins:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. (Gen. 1:1-3 ESV)

Now, there is a necessity to point out that New Covenant believers have the benefit of looking back to the beginning and can interpret it in the light of further revelation, namely the New Testament. That being established, one can see the following: God, the Spirit, and the Word. The work of God in creation correlates to the economic work of each of the divine persons in redemption. The Father plans and sends the Son, the Son, the Word made flesh, accomplishes the work of the Father, and the Holy Spirit applies, or as stated by Warfield above “executes,” the work of redemption and “re-creation.”

The necessity of pointing out this crucial biblical truth is that the same Spirit that “hovered” over the water, active in the actuation of the authoritative Word spoken, is the same Spirit active in drawing, convicting and regenerating sinners toward faith in Christ. The Spirit does all this through the authoritative Scriptures. John Owen comments on the nature of the power of the Scriptures:

It is absolutely called the “power of God,” and that unto its proper end; which way lies the tendency of its efficacy in operation. (Rom. i. 16.) It is δύναμις Θεοῦ, “vis, virtus Dei”- the “power of God.” Ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ, the “word concerning the cross”-that is, the gospel- is δύναμις Θεοῦ, (1 Cor. i. 18,) the “power of God.”... Surely that which is thus the power and authority of God is able to make itself known so to be.¹⁰

The author of Hebrews attests to this demonstrative power:

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. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. (Heb. 4:12-13 ESV)

This “living and active” word carries with it authoritative power. God, the Holy Spirit, uses them to convict, convince, and regenerate sinners. The Scriptures are a powerful demonstration of the sovereignty of God and His omnipotence. John Frame points to this truth in Psalm 33, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host... For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.”¹¹ (Psa 33:6,9 ESV)

¹⁰ John Owen, *Works of John Owen*, vol. 16 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 323.

¹¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 2010), 50.

Frame notes that “It is important to understand that we understand God’s word not only as a communication of linguistic content to our minds, though it is that, but as a great power that makes things happen.” God’s word always goes forth in demonstrative power.

The Practical Denial of Biblical Authority in Various Apologetic Methods

Unfortunately, the many evangelical academics forget that they are not dealing with neutral documents when they approach the Scriptures and it is the Scriptures, not them, that carry the authority. This mindset has trickled down to various disciplines. One can find in the current evangelical milieu platitudinous ascents to biblical authority, but in actual practice, the Scriptures have very little influence and prevalence in their lives. In the discipline of apologetics, there is no difference. There are various apologetic methods which this study will analyze and discuss their apologetic authority and foundations.

The Classical Approach

There are several classical apologists, and their theological positions all vary, but their apologetic methodology is very similar. Philosophical reasoning and rational arguments are the foundation for an excellent apologetic in the classical apologetic methodology. William Lane Craig, concluding an argument defending classical apologetics, states:

We can show that Christian theism is true by presenting arguments for theism and evidences for a specifically Christian theism, which go to show, when coupled with defensive apologetics, that Christian theism is the most plausible worldview a sufficiently informed, normal adult can adopt. The Holy Spirit will then use such arguments and evidence to draw unbelievers to a knowledge of God by removing their sinful resistance to the conclusion of our arguments.¹²

R. C. Sproul states:

If objective proof cannot persuade a person to respond to Christ without the intervention of the Holy Spirit, then why bother trying to give sound arguments for Christianity?

Within the classical methodology, the ability to give “evidence” and “sound arguments” becomes the foundation. Not to say that both authors deny biblical authority, but it is not reasoning from the Scriptures, as in the apostolic tradition (Acts 17:2), but with philosophic argumentation and therefore reason the two become authority.

In *Defending Your Faith* by R. C. Sproul, Sproul argues that there are four foundations for knowledge: The law of noncontradiction, the law of causality, the reliability of the senses, and the analogical use of language.¹³ He labors to demonstrate that evaluating these epistemological foundations by:

¹² William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, eds. Steven B. Cowan and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 65.

¹³ R. C. Sproul, *Defending Your Faith: An Introduction to Apologetics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 30-36.

Showing their validity. If we can do this, then the atheist will be hard-pressed to disprove the existence of God without casting aside one or all of these principles, thereby falling into irrationality.¹⁴

William Lane Craig argues for the importance of inductive and deductive reasoning as a foundation for sound philosophical argumentation. Unfortunately, Craig leaps from rationality to irrationality by stating, “We know Christianity is true primarily by the self-authenticating witness of God’s Spirit. We show Christianity is true by presenting good arguments for its central tenets.”¹⁵ So, the onus is on valid rational arguments and philosophical reasoning to win the skeptic to a theistic position.

Evidential Approach

The evidential approach demonstrates that the Bible is the authentic Scriptures using various methods. There is a necessity to point out, again, that evidentialist does not outright deny the authority of Scripture. Josh McDowell states, “The presentation of evidence (apologetics)

should never be a substitute for using the Word of God.”¹⁶ The whole of their method is to demonstrate the Scripture’s validity by examining the evidence for the faithfulness of Scripture, among other things. Evidentialist argue that the Scriptures are authoritative because they pass some vigorous examination of the historical evidence. For J. Warner Wallace that criteria are a conformation to modern forensic methodology. J. Warner Wallace writes:

There are many similarities between investigating cold cases and investigating the claims of Christianity. Cold-case homicides are events from the distant past for which there is often little or no forensic evidence. These kinds of cases are sometimes solved on the basis of eyewitness testimony, even though many years have passed between the point of the crime and the point of the investigation. . . In the end, a strong “circumstantial” case can usually be made by collecting witness statements and verifying these observations with what little forensic evidence is available.

The evidential approach puts the onus of authority on the validity of history and historical artifacts to justify the trustworthiness of the Scriptures.

In sum, The previous two apologetic methods hinge on one basic presupposition, namely that natural revelation, i.e., rational argumentation, philosophical reasoning, and evidence, is sufficient to bring a convicting knowledge of God. As noted above, “although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God,” they do not give salvific knowledge of God.¹⁷ The Christian’s “hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15) is not that there is a God and He has reliable documents, but that He sent His Son to live a sinless life, die for their sins, buried and on the third day rose.

Presuppositional Apologetics.

¹⁴ Sproul, *Defending Your Faith*, 36.

¹⁵ Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in Cowan and Gundry, 96.

¹⁶ Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 39.

¹⁷ *Second London Baptist Confession of 1689* ch. 1, section 1.

The authority of Scripture is best represented in the presuppositional apologetic methodology. The presuppositional model takes into consideration the biblical categories, such as redemptive-historical and systematic, and utilizes these categories to defend the faith. These categories are foundational to the Christian worldview. The necessity of using these categories is paramount on explaining and defending the faith. Van Til notes, “systemic theology is more closely related to apologetics than are any other of the disciplines. In it, we have the system of truth that we are to defend.”¹⁸ It is with this consideration and utilizing systematic theology categories that one can observe the methodology of the presuppositional approach.

The Doctrine of God

K. Scott Oliphant explains “The faith that we are defending must begin with, and necessarily include, the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who, as God, condescends to create and to redeem.”¹⁹ Oliphant also argues about the necessity of realizing that God’s condescension includes a covenantal relationship with His image-bearers and that all of these image-bearer genuinely know that there is a God.²⁰ The Scriptures do not argue for the existence of God; they presuppose and asserts this truth.

The Doctrine of Revelation

The presuppositional model acknowledges that God reveals Himself in two foundational ways: Through nature, or by general revelation and through Scripture, or by special revelation. General revelation is that revelation of God in creation, all aspects of creation. By all aspects of creation, it must be understood that “Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.” (Psa. 19:2,3 ESV) Necessarily, everything is revealing the God who is active in upholding and sustaining creation. Now, Van Til points out that “God speaks with authority wherever and whenever he speaks.”²¹ The presuppositional view does not deny that God reveals Himself truly and authentically in nature.

The presuppositional approach acknowledges that there is a benefit in natural theology, yet realizes that God gave the Scriptures as the foundation and evaluative tool for natural revelation. Why? Because, “men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” (Rom 1:18 ESV) The apostle Paul notes that creation, and all within it, has been affected by the fall writing:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom 8:19-21 ESV)

“Van Til writes “The natural must appear as under the curse of God. God’s covenant wrath rests securely and comprehensively upon man, and all that man has mismanaged.”²² This

¹⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 23.

¹⁹ K. Scott Oliphant, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 73.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium*, eds. Ned Bernard Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002.), 274.

²² *Ibid.*, 270.

unconscious suppression and the “futility of creation” can only be superseded by the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures. These truths go back to the rule, i.e., foundation and evaluative tool, and power, illuminating power of the Holy Spirit through the Scriptures, of the Scriptures as discussed above. There are no uninterpreted neutral facts, rational arguments, philosophical reasonings or evidence in God’s world, as Van Til notes, “We hold that without the presupposition of the triune God we cannot even interpret one fact correctly.”²³ The presuppositional methodology acknowledges this truth and utilizes the Scriptures to defend the faith.

These facts are what make it possible to do the work of apologetics, and the foundation of this approach is the Scriptures. It must be acknowledged, though, this approach considers the interpretation of Scripture throughout history. Van Til, writing to his critics, noted: “The critics (of his methodology) may, therefore, be expected to use the Scripture, taken to be the infallible rule of faith and practice, as their ultimate criterion and the historic Reformed confessions as their secondary criterion in their evaluation of my thinking.”²⁴

The Doctrine of Man

One foundational truth that all Christians have confessed and is affirmed in the first chapters of Genesis is:

After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, rendering them fit unto that life to God for which they were created; being made after the image of God, in knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness²⁵

On this matter, Oliphant writes that “Man (male and female) the image of God is in covenant with the triune God for eternity.”²⁶ Man, as male and female, is either in Christ or in Adam, that is in a covenant relationship of blessed fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through the finished work of Christ or is under the covenant curse by their identification with Adam and therefore the wrath of God rests upon them.

It is considering the truth that those “in Adam” suppress the truth in unrighteousness that the presuppositional apologist realizes that they need the authoritative rule and power of the Scriptures to interpret the natural world and help those “in Adam” see their need for Christ. Oliphant argues, “There is an absolute, covenantal antithesis between Christian theism and any other, opposing position.”²⁷ The acknowledgment of this covenantal antithesis is an essential difference between the presuppositional methodological approach and all others.

²³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Evidences*, ed. K. Scott Oliphant (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub, 2016.), 2.

²⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphant (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub, 2008), 2.

²⁵ *Second London Baptist Confession of 1689* ch. 4, section 2.

²⁶ K. Scott Oliphant, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

Conclusion

The presuppositional approach acknowledges that the only foundation and authority for apologetic methodology is Scripture. The classical and evidential approaches do not outright deny authority, but in their practices, they utilize other methods to validate the Scriptures authority. The objection often raised by skeptics is that the presuppositional approach has a circularity in its argumentation, but, as K. Scott Oliphant quipped, “on what basis should I accept your circle over mine?”²⁸ All authority has a level of circularity involved. For the rationalist, reason becomes the validating resource by which reason is validated and the same for the evidence, and so on.

If the Christian’s ultimate authority is the Scriptures, why abandon them in defense of one’s faith? There is a need for Christians to use reason, philosophy, and evidence, of course, but the ultimate foundation of the Christian worldview is the triune God’s revelation in the Scriptures. “This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him.” (Psa. 18:30 ESV) It is ultimately God, by His sovereign hand, who brings His people in contact with those who He wills to bring them to Himself. The presuppositional approach acknowledges that the Scriptures authority are both the rule and the power of God to His people and accomplish His purposes.

²⁸ Ibid., 36.

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