

## THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE IN APOLOGETICS

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*A simple statement from a kindergarten song such as “the Bible tells me so” is sufficient to prove the truthfulness of Christianity. That fact should prove to Christians that defending their faith from the standpoint of neutrality is fruitless. Believers have become enamored with a neutral starting point in apologetics because of the influence of modernism and postmodernism in today’s culture. Such a neutral beginning point is impossible because of a disagreement with unbelievers over the nature of knowledge. Also, neutrality is ineffective, because it grants autonomy to the unbeliever by releasing him from the authority of the Bible, and is inconsistent, because the Bible makes clear that Christ is the source of all knowledge. Since the Bible is sufficient in apologetics, Christians should attack the unbeliever’s worldview in addition to defending his own. God’s claim on the human intellect is absolute, not minimalistic. Because of this claim, apologetics is theological and not just philosophical. Arguing presuppositionally by using the Bible as the ultimate authority enables the Christian to cut the legs from under an unbeliever’s argument.*

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The fundamental question of apologetics, writes Robert L. Reymond, is, “How do I know that what I believe is true?”<sup>1</sup> Although most Christians agree that this is the essential question to be asked, few agree on what the answer should be. Some say they should believe Christianity because it conforms to the scientific, historical, and philosophical evidence. Others suggest they should believe Christianity because it works to solve their problems and improve their quality of life. And still others think they need not offer any reason to believe at all. Ironically, in the midst of these disagreements and discussions, they have had the answer all along. When it comes to apologetics, perhaps all can agree with the title of Robert

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<sup>1</sup>Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984) 5-6.

Fulghum's well-known book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. If Christians would only return to the simplicity and profundity of their kindergarten songs such as "Jesus loves me, this I know," they would discover the answer to their question of why they should believe: the Bible tells us so.

Undoubtedly, some will read this response and shake their heads disapprovingly: "The Bible tells me so? Is that it? That may have been a sufficient answer when I was five years old, but that will never hold up in my university religion class. Everybody knows that you can't assume what you are setting out to prove; I can't use the Bible to prove the Bible. I need some neutral starting place—where both the unbeliever and I agree—from which I can prove the Christian position."

This hypothetical response is all too common in the evangelical church today. Indeed, as the church has slowly abandoned its commitment to the sufficiency of Scripture, nowhere has it been more evident than in the area of apologetics. Some Christian apologists say that in order to gain a hearing from the world in arguing for the truth of Christianity, one must adopt a neutral and unbiased position as to the truthfulness of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> According to this view, a person must begin the defense of the Bible (and the Christian faith) with a "nobody knows for sure" type of attitude, being neither for nor against Christianity from the outset. It is only after having proven the reliability and trustworthiness of the Bible to the unbeliever from some common, neutral starting point that a believer can then turn around and appeal to the Bible as any sort of authority—thus, the Bible is the *conclusion* of the argument, not its foundation.

This essay purposes to challenge that popular view of apologetics. Although appealing to the Bible as the ultimate epistemological foundation for belief may seem simplistic and naive to some (as well as unpersuasive), the following discussion will argue that this is the key to maintaining the full sufficiency and authority of Scripture. Not only does God *not* call Christians to put the authority of His word "on the shelf" while they argue for Christianity, but doing so will deny the very thing they are setting out to prove, namely, that God's Word should be the authority over *every* area of thought (including apologetics). Indeed, the Bible is not just sufficient for *teaching* about the Christian worldview; it is sufficient also for *defending* the Christian worldview.

This does not mean, of course, that apologetics is reduced simply to quoting the Bible over and over again. On the contrary, introducing extrabiblical data into a discussion with the unbeliever is quite allowable and necessary (more on this below). But it does mean that the primary reason Christianity should be accepted as true is because God's Word declares it to be such. Bahnsen concurs: "The ultimate ground of the Christian's certainty and the authority backing up his

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<sup>2</sup>Dennis MacCullum in his book *Christianity: The Faith That Makes Sense* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1992) holds this view: "If we are fair, we will take a *neutral* posture when determining what to believe" (11 [emphasis added]).

argumentation must be the word of God.”<sup>3</sup>

After all, if the Bible really is God’s word, then to what more authoritative standard could one possibly appeal in order to defend it? What fact in the universe is more certain than the Scriptures? Therefore, when defending the faith, Christians must reject the allure of supposed neutrality and instead follow Peter’s instructions: “[I]n your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Pet 3:15, NIV [emphasis added]).

### **Roots of the Problem: Why Are Christians So Eager to be Neutral?**

What has caused modern-day apologetics to be so willing to adopt a “neutral” stance while arguing for the faith? The answer to this question is somewhat complex. Engaging in the apologetic task today involves two distinctive intellectual forces that have caused some to leave the Bible out of the discussion: modernity and postmodernity.

Modernity is a product of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>4</sup> With the rise of the Enlightenment there came a new guardian of truth to replace the church: science. No longer would human beings stand for the irrational musings and archaic dogmatism of religion—science (with reason as the foundation) was the new god and all intellectual theories had to bow and pay homage in order to be seriously considered. Science viewed Christians as being naively committed to ancient myths, unable to see past their bias and to take an objective and neutral look at the world. So, modernity proffers the idea that mankind, armed with rationalism and science, is able to access absolute truth and make unlimited progress toward a better life for itself. Therefore, at its core, modernity is a celebration of human autonomy.

Charles Darwin, in his 1859 *The Origin of Species*, exhibited clearly the effects of modernity when he referred to the Christian view of creation as “a curious illustration of the blindness of preconceived opinion.”<sup>5</sup> Darwin, like most modern evolutionists, was eager to frame the debate to offer two options and two options only for those wishing to settle the enigma of origins. On one side was the evolutionist; he was scientific, objective, and empirical. On the other side was the Christian; according to Darwin, he was speculative, biased, and irrational, relying on faith, not on science. A choice between the two was obvious. Who would want to side with religion over science? Who would reject the obvious empirical data in favor of myths and conjecture?

This sort of pressure from modernity has caused many Christians to modify

<sup>3</sup>Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1996) 68.

<sup>4</sup>For an excellent treatment of Enlightenment thought see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 1951).

<sup>5</sup>Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: The Modern Library, 1859) 369.

their apologetic strategy. To avoid the charge of having “preconceived opinions” or of being “biased,” many Christians have insisted on leaving the Bible out of the discussion—after all, you cannot use what you are trying to prove. In an effort to show that Christianity passes the scientific test, they insist that scientific evidence, and scientific evidence alone, should decide the debate. Therefore, they start their argument from neutral ground, being neither for nor against Christianity from the outset, in hopes of gaining credibility with the unbeliever and showing him that the facts “speak for themselves” and undeniably lead to Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

But when they argue like this, what they often do not realize is that they are letting modernity set the criteria for truth: reason and science. Instead of *challenging* modernity’s criteria for truth (insisting it should be the Bible), they simply try to *meet* their criteria for truth. Thus, in an attempt to beat the scientists at their own game, the apologetic task primarily takes the form of philosophical, historical, and scientific arguments, and the Bible becomes merely the conclusion of the entire process.

Postmodernity, although no friend of modernity, proves itself to be an equally influential factor in the way evangelicals do apologetics today. Postmodernity, in contrast to modernity, rejects any notion of objective truth and insists that the only absolute in the universe is that there are no absolutes. Tolerance is the supreme virtue and exclusivity the supreme vice. Truth is not grounded in reality or in any sort of authoritative “text,” but is simply constructed by the mind of the individual. Consequently, postmodernity has given birth to the radical deconstructionism of Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty, and Jacques Derrida which has taken hold in today’s universities. Deconstructionism has relegated all texts to simply societal constructions—i.e., the readers’ own experience and perspective so conditions interpretations that there can be no one “right” interpretation. Phillips and Okholm furnish an example when they write,

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<sup>6</sup>There are numerous examples of many well-meaning Christians defending the faith as if the “facts” themselves are decisive, irrespective of underlying philosophical presuppositions. There is at least a broad conception that unbelievers have the ability (and the authority) to interpret the facts and decide for themselves. Phillip Johnson—who has done an outstanding job cataloging the evidence against Darwinism—in his recent work *Darwin on Trial* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993) seems eager to keep the Bible out of the picture and stay focused on the facts alone: “One thing I am not doing is taking sides in a Bible-science conflict. I am interested in what unbiased scientific investigation has to tell us about the history of life” (157). Johnson, who is usually very perceptive about underlying assumptions, seems to think the “neutral” and “objective” facts will decide the issue. Paul Little in *Know Why You Believe* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1981) seems not to realize that man’s rational abilities are tainted by sin and unable to interpret the facts correctly. He thinks the problem is with only the moral will of man and not his intellect: “[Unbelievers] don’t want to believe it. It’s not a matter of brain power. . . . It is primarily a matter of the will” (43 [emphasis in the original]). A final example is Bill Bright in the foreword to Josh McDowell’s *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, vol.1 (San Bernardino, Calif.: Here’s Life, 1979), who declares: “I personally have never heard a single individual—who has honestly considered the evidence—deny that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and the Savior of men. The evidence confirming the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ is overwhelmingly conclusive to any honest, objective seeker after truth” (iii). But who is honest and objective?

Then how can we speak of any reality outside the autonomous self? We create it with words. Postmodernism shares a purely pragmatic instrumental view of language. There are no true propositions. There is only the question of what words we should use.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, postmodernity, just like modernity, also celebrates human autonomy. Despite the fact that the two philosophies are in some ways opposed, the one thing they have in common is that man is both the starting place and the stopping place for whatever can be deemed “truth.”

Obviously this radical relativism and pluralism has also affected apologetic method. Due to the hostility (or should I say “intolerance”) displayed by postmodernists toward those who make absolute truth claims, Christians have tended to act more “neutral” and less assured of their position, leaving the Bible out of the discussion all together. After all, the Bible has a way of being inconveniently dogmatic—which would certainly turn off any listener with a postmodern mindset. Furthermore, the deconstructionist tendencies of the postmodern culture make any appeal to an authoritative text seem almost irrelevant. Phillips and Okholm note, “Postmodern people are reluctant to accept totalizing metanarratives that define reality and truth for them.”<sup>8</sup>

If one cannot appeal to the Bible in an apologetic encounter with the postmodernist, then it must be replaced with some other argument for why Christianity should be accepted. At this point, evangelicals find themselves again trying to meet their opponents’ criteria for truth (as they did with modernity above), rather than challenging their criteria for truth. What are the postmodernists’ criteria for “truth”? Simply what works. The postmodernist is not concerned about absolute truth like the modernist; he defines his “truth” by more pragmatic concerns: What makes me feel good? What solves my problems? What is attractive to me? Consequently, so much of modern apologetics today (and modern preaching) tries to cater to the felt needs of its audience. Thus, the argument for Christianity takes on therapeutic overtones: a person should become a Christian because it will make you feel better; it will improve your quality of life; it will bring you inner peace, etc.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm, eds., *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995) 13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 22.

<sup>9</sup>Allow me to make some qualifications. I am not suggesting that there is never a time to mention all the blessings and benefits that the Christian life offers. Indeed, it does offer joy and peace and hope, etc.; and many people are attracted by such things and should be. Furthermore, these things should be a large part of our evangelism, i.e., we do want to tell people that real and abundant life is in Christ. However, never should these blessings and benefits of Christianity be presented as the primary *reason* why Christianity is true, because this simply makes pragmatism the criterion for truth. How then could we respond to the unbeliever when he tells us that Hinduism works “better” for him and brings him more peace and hope? In effect, what we have done by making pragmatism the main argument is grant man autonomy do decide what he likes best and then call that “truth.” Ideally, our apologetic ought to rest solely on the authority of the Bible, but at the same time be willing to share and teach about the obvious blessing and benefits of the Christian life.

*Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* edited by Phillips and Okholm shows postmodernity's effect on apologetic method. The book offers an apologetic response by various authors to the ominous threats of postmodernity. Although many essays were helpful and well-intentioned, much of the book is unfortunately an example of the impact of postmodernity on apologetic method rather than an example of how apologetics should impact postmodernity. A specific instance of this is the article by Phillip D. Kenneson entitled, "There's No Such Thing As Objective Truth, and It's a Good Thing Too."<sup>10</sup> As the title promises, Kenneson denies the concept of objective truth, and even suggests that such a concept is "corrupting the church."<sup>11</sup> Kenneson also says,

I realize there are plenty of Christians who think it makes good sense to say the proposition, 'Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe' is objectively true; that is, our temptation is to insist that this is simply true whether we or anyone else believe it or not. But succumbing to such a temptation is deadly for the church. There is no place to stand and judge this statement as true per se.<sup>12</sup>

But what about the Bible as a place to stand? Can one not appeal to the Scriptures as a reason why this is objectively true? Since Kenneson has adjusted his apologetic to the demands of the postmodern world, then it is no surprise that his apologetic has nothing to do with the authority and place of the Bible—any appeal to the Bible as a reason for why the postmodern world should believe is conspicuously absent.<sup>13</sup> In its place is a much more pragmatic approach; the argument for why people should become Christians is that they see the "moral authority of the church's embodied life" and are consequently attracted to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the way the unbeliever can know Christianity is "true" is by seeing that it really "works" to change lives and make people different.

Although Kenneson's insistence that the church faithfully live out its beliefs in the eyes of the world should be applauded—indeed a consistent witness can gain

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<sup>10</sup>It is interesting that Kenneson's premise that there is no objective truth makes his own title contradictory. In other words, is it objectively true that "There is no such thing as objective truth"? If not, then the title is in error; if so, then the title is still in error because the title claims there is not any objective truth. Either way, Kenneson's view turns out to be self-contradictory. He tries to avoid this problem by suggesting that he also does not believe in "relativism" which is what he considers to be the flip side of objective truth. So, Kenneson says, if you reject relativism, you must also reject objective truth. However, then we must ask, Is it objectively true that rejecting relativism requires rejecting objective truth? Whether the answer is yes or no, Kenneson's view is still self-contradictory.

<sup>11</sup>In *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, Phillips and Okholm, eds., 156.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid, 167.

<sup>13</sup>The words "Bible" or "Scripture" were never used in the entire article (according to my fallible counting), and a verse was quoted once (1 Pet 3:15), but only as an example of what method is *not* effective in a postmodern world.

<sup>14</sup>Kenneson, "No Such Thing As Objective Truth" 166.

a hearing from the world and is honoring to God—his attempt to make pragmatic considerations the foundational reason why Christianity is “true” will ultimately deny Christianity any authority to challenge the unbeliever’s autonomy. The discussion to follow will explore this issue and more aspects of Kenneson’s article (and subsequently the book as a whole).

So modernity and postmodernity have had an effect on apologetic approaches and have slowly removed the Bible from the center of defending the faith and replaced it with a demand for neutrality. From this position of supposed neutrality both have their own criteria for truth that they demand be met: the modernist wants to see if it is scientific/reasonable and the postmodernist wants to see if it works to improve his life. Although Christians certainly should be aware of culture and adjust their apologetics to the need of the hour, it seems they may have unfortunately gone too far and allowed non-Christian opponents to set the terms of the debate. They have, perhaps in the name of relevancy, altered the fundamental nature of the Christian argument so that it is more palatable and attractive to those who hear it. But, as Os Guinness has noted, relevancy can be a dangerous venture:

In addition, relevance has a false allure that masks both its built-in transience and its catch-22 demand. Dean Inge captured the transience in his celebrated line “He who marries the spirit of the age soon becomes a widower.” But it was Simone Weil who highlighted the catch-22: “To be always relevant, you have to say things which are eternal.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that holding a neutral and “nobody knows for sure” attitude seems popular with modern-postmodern culture, evangelicals cannot adhere to such a starting point in their apologetic process.

### **The Essence of the Problem: Why Not Be Neutral?**

As culture perpetually pressures Christians toward intellectual agnosticism, it is imperative they understand why they must resist. Does it really matter if they seek to plant their apologetic in the soil of neutrality? Consider three reasons why believers should not to be neutral.

#### **Neutrality Is Impossible**

Jesus has declared neutrality to be impossible: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matt 6:24, NIV). Failing to comprehend this truth has lured many Christian apologists into a very common mistake: they ignore the philosophical worldviews that lie behind each system of thought and instead quibble over

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<sup>15</sup>*Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 63.

isolated facts only, not realizing that it is the philosophical worldview (or presuppositions) of people that determines what they see as a “fact.” In other words, they forget that every person has a “worldview” through which and by which he interprets the evidence—making neutrality an impossibility.<sup>16</sup> John Frame notes that “there is no ‘purely empirical’ inquiry. We never encounter ‘brute,’ that is, uninterpreted facts. We only encounter facts that have been interpreted in terms of our existing commitments.”<sup>17</sup>

Consequently, the disagreement between the Christian and the non-Christian is not over just, for example, whether Pontius Pilate was a real historical figure, rather the disagreement is over the very nature of knowledge itself. The Christian, as he sets out to defend the Bible, will soon realize (if he is perceptive) that his disagreement with the non-Christian is not just about what took place in history, but is about the very nature of historical research, reasoning, and evaluation. In other words, as Christians debate non-Christians, it will soon become apparent that their disagreement covers not only *what* they claim to know but also, due to their conflicting worldviews, it also covers their *method* of knowing (epistemology).

Therefore, rather than simply tossing out the facts to the unbeliever as if he were objective and unbiased, Christians need to challenge the unbeliever’s philosophy of fact, i.e., to attack his worldview as much as attacking the conclusions of his worldview. As was noted above in the discussion of modernity/postmodernity, believers need to concern themselves not just with *meeting* their opponents criteria for truth (which is determined by their worldview), but also with *challenging* their opponents’ criteria for truth by showing that it should be God’s Word.

Now, if evangelicals fail to consider and respond to the underlying presuppositions of the unbeliever, then he will simply “reinterpret” their facts within his own worldview. For example, imagine an atheist walking down the street in Washington, D.C., when suddenly God appears to him. What would his response be? Well, according to his worldview there is no God and no supernatural, so he would likely pass the event off as a peculiar and rare hallucination. Now, say that he continues down the street and sees the president walking across the White House lawn. Does he think *this* is a hallucination? No, because it fits with his prior set of beliefs, namely, that the president is a real human being who resides in Washington and lives on Pennsylvania Avenue. The bottom line is this: what a particular individual regards as a fact is dependent upon his prior worldview.

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<sup>16</sup>A worldview can be defined as a network of assumptions (or presuppositions) not tested by natural science in terms of which all experience is related and interpreted. A worldview is not just one belief, but a comprehensive network of beliefs that deal not only with religious ideas but with every aspect of human experience from science to the arts. Thomas Kuhn reflects such an idea (he calls “paradigms”) as it applies to scientific study and experimentation. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970).

<sup>17</sup>John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987) 117.

Games such as chess and checkers illustrate this point further. Each game has its own rules and standards about what is possible and impossible, what is winning and what is losing, what is a good strategy and what is a bad strategy. How absurd would it be for the chess player to criticize the checkers player for violating the rules of chess? The rules and “facts” of one game are entirely different from those of the other. Similarly, if a Christian engages a non-Christian in a debate without challenging his overarching worldview, then his effectiveness will be minimal; each side is playing by its own set of rules. Consider the words of Cornelius Van Til,

When man became a sinner he made of himself instead of God the ultimate or final reference point. And it is precisely this presupposition, as it controls without exception all forms of non-Christian philosophy, that must be brought into question. *If this presupposition is left unquestioned in any field all the facts and arguments presented to the unbeliever will be made over by him according to his pattern.*<sup>18</sup>

So, for Christians to enter into an intellectual debate thinking the brute facts themselves will be decisive is simply naive. The unbeliever is not only biased, but the Scriptures indicate that he is adamantly biased *against* God.<sup>19</sup> He hates God and suppresses the knowledge of God every chance that he gets (Rom 1:18-20; 3:10-18).

### Neutrality Is Ineffective

Attempts to be neutral have a bit of irony to them. Believers agree to meet unbelievers on some common ground because they are convinced that it will make them more effective, when in fact that is the very thing that hinders them. It is similar to young David’s attempt to wear Saul’s armor in his fight against Goliath (1 Sam 17:38-39). It seemed like the right thing to do in battle, but it proved to be more of a hindrance than a help. In the end, David simply needed to trust that God knew better how to wage warfare than he did.

In a discourse with the unbeliever, he will perpetually demand that Christians be neutral (as he considers himself to be). If they agree with their opponent at this point, they have lost the debate from the outset and minimized their effectiveness. Why? Because the moment they get out their intellectual flashlights and join the unbeliever in the search for truth from some supposedly neutral starting point—claiming “the facts speak for themselves”—then they have conceded that he

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<sup>18</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967) 77 [emphasis added].

<sup>19</sup>Herbert Schlossberg notes the amazing bias against the Christian view of creation by quoting D. M. S. Watson: “Evolution itself is accepted by zoologists not because it has been observed to occur or . . . can be proved by logically coherent evidence to be true, but because the only alternative, special creation, is clearly incredible” (*Idols for Destruction* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1990] 144). He then goes on to note how “the scientific scabbards fall away to reveal ideological swords” (*ibid.*, 145).

is able and competent to correctly interpret the facts.<sup>20</sup> Thus, when the unbeliever turns around and uses the facts to argue against Christianity, Christians no longer have a basis to object to his conclusions. After all, did they not tell him “the facts speak for themselves”? To grant the unbeliever neutrality is like handing him a loaded gun; why should believers be surprised then when he turns around and uses it against them?<sup>21</sup>

The point is this: to grant neutrality to the unbeliever is to grant him autonomy—the very autonomy so cherished by the forces of modernity and postmodernity (as was seen above). To say that man can reason correctly and cogently apart from having the Bible at the foundation of his thinking sets man up as the standard and the judge over what is true and what is not true; he becomes the ultimate epistemological authority and not the Bible. Such a situation is obviously abhorrent to God, who proclaims Himself as the ultimate authority of the universe and condemns man’s quest for independence and intellectual self-sufficiency (1 Sam 2:3; Prov 1:7; Isa 40:25; Rom 10:9; 14:9; Phil 2:11; 2 Cor 10:5) .

Furthermore, such a method of arguing with the unbeliever virtually encourages his rejection of the Bible: if the unbeliever is allowed to make the decision independent of God and according to his own standards (which are sinful and depraved), then he certainly will conclude against God’s Word. Even if the unbeliever *did* accept God’s word after such a process of reasoning, that does not alleviate the problem. Note the insightful words of C.S. Lewis: “The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock.”<sup>22</sup>

Phillip Kenneson’s article, “There’s No Such Thing As Objective Truth and It’s a Good Thing Too,” falls into this same trap from a postmodern mindset. As was noted earlier, his suggestion that Christianity’s authority is founded on pragmatic grounds grants to the unbeliever the authority and autonomy to decide which

<sup>20</sup>Van Til explains the futility of granting neutrality to the unbeliever: “Shall we in the interest of a point of contact admit that man can interpret anything correctly if he virtually leaves God out of the picture? Shall we who wish to prove that nothing can be explained without God first admit some things at least can be explained without him? On the contrary we shall show that all explanations without God are futile. Only when we do this do we appeal to the knowledge of God within men which they seek to suppress. This is what I mean by presupposing God for the possibility of intelligent predication” (Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* 200).

<sup>21</sup>A great example of granting the unbeliever authority to interpret the facts as he sees fit is found in Terry L. Miethe, ed., *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* (San Francisco: Harper and Row 1987). Miethe, in his introduction to the debate between Habermas and Flew, states, “Each person should study the arguments, sift the evidence, and decide which case best fits the facts. . . . The decision is yours” (xvi). How, then, could the Christian respond when the unbeliever comes back from judging the evidence having concluded *against* Christianity? Didn’t we tell him that he had the ability and the right to interpret the evidence correctly? Thus, to grant neutrality to the unbeliever is to lose the debate from the outset.

<sup>22</sup>C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 244.

communities of faith he really feels embody the values he desires. In fact, Kenneson quotes the deconstructionist Richard Rorty on this note. Rorty declares that after giving up on the idea of objective truth, the next step is to decide “what sort of human being you want to become.” Kenneson then goes on to declare that one must choose from among the “communities whose convictions and practices are themselves an embodiment of what they take to be good and true.”<sup>23</sup> The problem with this is quite clear: what if the unbeliever decides that it is the Mormon community that he finds most credible and that embodies the values he desires? Or what if he feels most helped by the Jehovah’s Witnesses? Since Kenneson has left the authority of Scripture out of the argument and turned that authority over to the unbeliever, he has no response to offer.<sup>24</sup>

Yet another example of this occurs in an article by John Gay, enticingly entitled, “How to Pick Your Own God (And Why I Picked Mine).”<sup>25</sup> Although undoubtedly well-intentioned, Gay also seems not to realize that the very title of his article is giving away the store. The question of how the unbeliever should pick his own god is mute because he has already made his choice: his god is himself (Phil 3:19). Therefore, if the believer tells the unbeliever—who is an enemy of God and depraved in sin—to pick whatever god seems to suit his fancy (without challenging the criteria by which he picks that god), he will have a very predictable result: the unbeliever’s god will be just like himself (Deut 4:28; Ps 115:8). After all, if the rule of the game is choice, then on what ground can a believer object to the unbeliever’s decision? Instead of stroking the non-Christian’s autonomy and independence by giving him a “choice,” the Christian should challenge him to abandon his self-sufficiency by submitting to the authority of God’s Word.

### Neutrality is Inconsistent

The final reason one should not seek neutrality in intellectual debates is because it is inconsistent with the teachings of Scripture that are the objects to be proven in the first place. Proverbs 1:7 (NIV) records, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” This verse is not saying that the fear of the Lord is the *result* of having knowledge or that after a detailed examination of the data a person concludes that he ought to fear the Lord. No, the claim here is that unless one fears the Lord from the outset and subjects his mind to God’s way of thinking, then he can

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<sup>23</sup>Knesson, “No Such Thing As Objective Truth” 162.

<sup>24</sup>D.A. Carson declares: “The primary criterion for what is right and true and valuable cannot possibly be whether or not you feel helped. This does not mean that the gospel of Jesus Christ *cannot* help you: it can and it does, and will. It means that the content of that gospel cannot be determined or approved simply on the basis of whether or not you *feel* helped. For if that were the case, would not the archenemy, whose love of deception is well known, have a field day ‘helping’ people, and helping people feel helped, provided the result is that they are diverted from the cross?” (D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God* [Grand Rapids, Zondervan: 1996] 469 [emphasis in the original]).

<sup>25</sup>John Gay, “How to Pick Your Own God (And Why I Picked Mine),” located at [www.everystudent.com](http://www.everystudent.com), Campus Crusade for Christ, 1996.

know nothing at all.<sup>26</sup> This truth is reiterated by Col 2:3 (NIV) which reads, “In [Christ] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Christ is not just the source of religious knowledge or some knowledge, but is the source of *all* knowledge.

Such texts make the incredibly bold assertion that a person cannot have knowledge unless he grounds his thinking in the principles of God’s word, i.e., unless he thinks like a Christian. How inconsistent it would be then to try to convince the unbeliever of this truth from some neutral starting place without thinking distinctively like a Christian? How can anyone claim the Bible is the ultimate source of authority in the universe, when all the while suggesting that it should only be believed because it conforms to some other “neutral” standard (which itself does not have the Bible as its ultimate source of authority)? If the method of argumentation communicates to the unbeliever that he should believe the Bible only because it has received the stamp of approval from science, archaeology, and historical criticism, those disciplines, not the Bible, will be his ultimate authority. Richard L. Pratt says it well:

If, however, trust in Christ is founded on logical consistency, historical evidence, scientific arguments, etc., then Christ is yet to be received as the ultimate authority. The various foundations are more authoritative than Christ himself. To use yet another analogy, if belief in Christian truth comes only after the claims of Christ are run through the verification machine of human judgment, then human judgment is still thought to be the ultimate authority.<sup>27</sup>

The conclusion therefore is this: Christians must think like Christians and appeal to Christian principles even when they argue for the truth of the Christian position. This is the essence of arguing *presuppositionally*.<sup>28</sup> This is the only way to be consistent with the Bible’s own claims that it and nothing else is the supreme and ultimate intellectual standard in the universe.

Missing the above-stated fact is precisely why so many well-meaning Christians compromise key parts of Scripture. For example, if they only believe the Bible because it is proven by science, then they can hardly believe the parts that do not conform with the current scientific consensus (and thus they must suggest

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<sup>26</sup>This is the difference between saying, “I understand in order to believe” (*intelligo ut credum*) and “I believe in order to understand” (*credo ut intelligam*).

<sup>27</sup>Richard L. Pratt, *Every Thought Captive* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979) 79-80.

<sup>28</sup>Recognizing that Christianity is the foundation for all knowledge is the essence of presuppositionalism and is what sets it apart from other methods of apologetics. Van Til declared that any other type “of apologetics assumes that man can first know much about himself and the universe and *afterward* ask whether God exists and Christianity is true. The Reformed apologist assumes that nothing can be known by man about himself or the universe unless God exists and Christianity is true” (*Defense of the Faith* 223 [emphasis in the original]).

“alternate” interpretations or abandon the veracity of certain portions of Scripture). If they submit the Scriptures to be verified by another standard of truth other than itself (whether it be modernity’s science or postmodernity’s pragmatism), then their view of Scripture’s authority will be only as high as those standards.

This does not require one to oppose the use of evidence to bolster confidence in the Christian faith.<sup>29</sup> It is important to demonstrate the historical reliability of the biblical documents and show how science supports the scriptural account of creation. Believers should cite extra-biblical facts that help confirm the Bible’s claims. All of these are valid types of arguments. However, they should never act for a moment as though those were neutral facts that hold some authority independent of a scriptural interpretation. They are God’s facts. And they are to be interpreted according to God’s Word. Unless this is made apparent to the unbeliever, the facts are bound to be misinterpreted and used against Christianity. John Frame’s conclusion is correct: “We may use extra-biblical data in apologetics, but not as independent criteria to which Scripture must measure up.”<sup>30</sup>

At this point the most common objection raised is this, “Are you saying we should assume the Christian worldview as we try to prove the Christian worldview? Isn’t that circular reasoning?” The simple answer is yes, that is circular reasoning. Although most circular reasoning is negative, when one argues for an *ultimate* intellectual criterion, a certain amount of circularity is unavoidable.<sup>31</sup> If I stake the truth of the Bible on anything other than its own self-attesting authority, then the Bible ceases to be the ultimate criterion for truth and is replaced by another ultimate criterion. All other philosophical systems are in the same situation. John Frame notes,

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<sup>29</sup>For an excellent treatment of how to use evidence within a presuppositional framework see Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

<sup>30</sup>Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994) 21.

<sup>31</sup>To deny circularity when it comes to an ultimate authority is to subject oneself to an infinite regress of reasons. If a person holds to a certain view, A, then when A is challenged he appeals to reasons B and C. But, of course, B and C will certainly be challenged as to why they should be accepted, and then the person would have to offer D, E, F, and G as arguments for B and C. And the process goes on and on. Obviously it has to stop somewhere because an infinite regress of arguments can not demonstrate the truth of one’s conclusions. Thus, every worldview (and every argument) must have an ultimate, unquestioned, self-authenticating starting point. Another example: imagine someone asking you whether the meter stick in your house was actually a meter long. How would you demonstrate such a thing? You could take it to your next-door neighbor and compare it to his meter stick and say, “See, it’s a meter.” However, the next question is obvious, “How do we know your *neighbor’s* meter stick is really a meter?” This process would go on and on infinitely unless there were an ultimate meter stick (which, if I am not mistaken, actually existed at one time and was measured by two fine lines marked on a bar of platinum-iridium alloy). It is this ultimate meter stick that defines a meter. When asked how one knows whether the ultimate meter stick is a meter, the answer is obviously circular: the ultimate meter stick is a meter because it is a meter. This same thing is true for Scripture. The Bible does not just happen to be true (the meter stick in your house), rather it is the very criterion for truth (the ultimate meter stick) and therefore the final stopping point in intellectual justification.

Every philosophy must use its own standards in proving its conclusions; otherwise it is simply inconsistent. Those who believe that human reason is the ultimate authority (“rationalists”) must presuppose the authority of reason in their arguments for rationalism. Those who presuppose the ultimacy of sense experience must presuppose that in arguing for their philosophy (“empiricism”). And skeptics must be skeptical of their own skepticism (a fact which is, of course, the Achilles heel of skepticism). The point is that when one is arguing for an ultimate criterion . . . one must use criteria compatible with that conclusion. If that is circularity then everybody is guilty of circularity.<sup>32</sup>

The words of Bahnsen sum up the need to argue presuppositionally:

The Believer must defend *God's word* as the ultimate starting point, the unquestionable authority, the self-attesting foundation of all thought and commitment. . . . The fact that the apologist presupposes the word of God in order to carry on a discussion or debate about the veracity of that word does not *nullify* his argument, but rather *illustrates* it.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Resolution to the Problem: How Then Should Christians Argue?**

The previous sections of this essay sought to lay a foundation for apologetics that is faithful to the sufficiency and authority of Scripture. The next question is more tangible: if the Bible is sufficient in apologetics, how should that affect the manner in which Christians argue for the truth of the Christian position? Consider what it means to argue for the faith while having God's Word as the foundation.

### **Offensive Not Just Defensive**

Unfortunately the term *apologetics* conjures up certain images in the mind that are not altogether accurate. It causes a person to view the task as primarily defensive, to think his job is to answer questions, respond to objections, deflect attacks, and, most important, not to look like a fool. Although some of those factors are parts of apologetics, the Scriptures reveal a different emphasis. God refuses to take the role of defendant and to be cross-examined by man. Instead He goes on the offensive and calls unbelievers fools (Ps 14:1) and refers to them as bound by the “futility of their thinking” and “darkened in their understanding” (Eph 4:17-18). Furthermore, as noted above, Paul makes it clear that unless men found their thinking on the Scriptures, they can know nothing at all (Prov 1:7, Col 2:3).

Such passages point out the way to argue: rather than simply fending off intellectual blows of the unbeliever, believers must attack the unbeliever's own

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<sup>32</sup>John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* 10.

<sup>33</sup>Bahnsen, *Always Ready* 75 [emphasis in the original].

worldview and reveal its logical absurdity and incoherence.<sup>34</sup> Being confident in God's Word, they must go on the offensive and compare worldviews with the non-Christian, showing that only the Christian worldview provides the foundation for knowledge and rationality. How does the Christian worldview provide the foundation for knowledge? The necessary preconditions of knowledge—logic, science, and morality—are intelligible and coherent only within the framework of Christianity.<sup>35</sup> Upon scrutiny, the unbeliever's worldview cannot account for these preconditions and therefore provides no basis for knowledge.

Thus, the reason the non-Christian should believe Christianity is because he has no other choice if he wants to make sense out of reality. In philosophical terms, this argument shows "the impossibility of the contrary." Bahnsen makes this point:

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<sup>34</sup>I do not intend to convey the impression that the Christian ought to attack the non-Christian personally, or to be rude and excessively argumentative. It is our duty at all times to behave with courtesy, patience, and kindness. The thing to be attacked is not the unbeliever himself, but the content of his worldview.

<sup>35</sup>Logic, science, and morality make no sense within the non-Christian worldview. For example, how can the atheist justify and explain the origin and universal applicability of moral absolutes? He simply cannot. Consider philosopher William Lane Craig as he explains the impossibility of moral absolutes in an atheist worldview:

If there is no God, then any ground for regarding the herd morality evolved by homo sapiens as objectively true seems to have been removed. After all, what is so special about human beings? They are just accidental by-products of nature which have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and which are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. Some action, say incest, may not be biologically or socially advantageous and so in the course of human evolution has become taboo; but there is on the atheistic view nothing really wrong about committing incest. If, as Kurt states, "The moral principles that govern our behavior are rooted in habit and custom, feeling and fashion," then the non-conformist who chooses to flout the herd morality is doing nothing more serious than acting unfashionably (William Lane Craig, *The Indispensability of Theological Meta-Ethical Foundations for Morality*, located at <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/meta-eth.html>, 4). Furthermore, science is only possible if one makes certain assumptions. Pearcey and Thaxton note, "Scientific investigation depends on certain assumptions about the world—and science is impossible until those assumptions are in place" (Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton, *The Soul of Science* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1994] 21.) One must assume the uniformity of nature (that the future will be like the past) in order to do science. However, the atheist has no empirical reason to believe the future will be like the past; in his world things just "happen." Consider David Hume:

As to past *Experience*, it can be allowed to give *direct* and *certain* information of those precise objects only, and that precise period of time, which fell under its cognizance: but why this experience should be extended to future times, and to other objects, which for aught we know, may be only in appearance similar; this is the main question on which I would insist. The bread which I formerly eat, nourished me . . . but does it follow, that other bread must also nourish me at another time . . . ? The consequence seems nowise necessary (David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902) 4:2:29 [emphasis in the original]).

Thus, only if one assumes the Christian worldview, where God orders and establishes nature, can a person assume the future will be like the past.

The Christian apologist, defending his ultimate presuppositions, must be prepared to argue the *impossibility of the contrary*—that is, to argue that the philosophical perspective of the unbeliever destroys meaning, intelligence, and the very possibility of knowledge, while the Christian faith provides the only framework and conditions for intelligible experience and rational certainty.<sup>36</sup>

But, if Christianity alone provides the foundation for knowledge, how is it that non-Christians know so many things? Have they not been some of the brightest people? And have not non-Christians built bridges, cured diseases, and sent men to the moon?

That question gets to the heart of the situation with the unbeliever. Yes, the unbeliever does know many things, but only because he “borrows” principles from the Christian worldview in order to provide a foundation for that knowledge. The unbeliever is inconsistent with his own worldview (whether it be atheism, agnosticism, etc.) and actually *does* think like a Christian at times. He does use logic. He does use science. He does make absolute moral statements. *But—and this is the key—his own worldview provides no foundation for such things.* An atheist, for example, makes moral claims (e.g., “murder is wrong,” “we shouldn’t pollute the environment,” etc.), but why, according to his own worldview, would there be moral absolutes? In an atheistic world, where there is simply matter and molecules, morality proves to be an entirely incoherent concept.<sup>37</sup> So, in order to live rationally, he has to act as though the Christian worldview were true, as though there really were a God that ordered the universe and provided such laws. In this sense he presupposes Christianity in order to have knowledge and rationality.

In the end, therefore, the unbeliever is really a walking bag of contradictions. He verbally and outwardly rejects the Christian God and claims that He does not exist, but then turns around and lives as though there really were such a God. He says the universe is just all chance and matter in motion, and yet he kisses his wife good-bye as though there were really something abstract called “love” in the world. He proclaims a universe where tooth and claw reign, but then takes moral offense at murders and rapes announced on the evening news. Paul describes this exact situation in Romans 1 when he reveals that in his heart of hearts the unbeliever really knows God, but suppresses that knowledge in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18 ff.).

The bottom line is this: the unbeliever cannot be allowed to critique

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<sup>36</sup>Bahnsen, *Always Ready* 72 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>37</sup>The presuppositional method of argumentation can be used for others besides atheists. Even other religions have to account for the laws of logic, the uniformity of nature, and moral absolutes. Therefore, the Christian will proceed to do an *internal critique* of these other religions to show that their gods ultimately break down and cannot provide the preconditions of knowledge. For example, the Mormon god is actually not one god, but many gods, i.e., polytheism. It can be shown that polytheism is not a sufficient system to provide moral absolutes because, after all, which of the many gods determines the moral code? If they all obey some higher moral standard, then *that* is the true god. If they can all do as they please, then there can be no moral absolutes (e.g., perhaps to some god rape is a “good” thing).

Christianity from a distance without being challenged to offer a cohesive worldview of his own. And when he does offer his own worldview, it is the duty of the Christian to take the wrecking ball of God's Word to that worldview and show how it self-destructs. So, instead of getting bogged down in the mire of neutrality, apologizing for and qualifying Christian convictions, believers must use God's Word as it was meant to be used: as a sword to tear down strongholds (Eph 5:17).

### **Absolute Not Minimalistic**

In light of the aforementioned truths, God's claim on the intellect of men is nothing short of absolute. God does not simply offer Himself as a nice addition to man's already rational existence. God is not merely useful to men because He can explain some facts that could not otherwise be explained. No, men need God if they are to have any knowledge *whatsoever*. Without God, men lie in ignorance and utter futility.

That understanding ought to be a challenge to "minimalistic" types of argumentation. God is not calling Christians to argue that Christianity is just "probable" or "possible" or the best of many reasonable options.<sup>38</sup> No, Christianity is the *only* option for a person who does not want to be led into intellectual foolishness (Ps 14:1). In a world where Christ is the ultimate creator of everything (Col 1:16), where He sustains everything by the power of His word (Heb 1:3), where He is the way the truth and the life (John 14:6), and all knowledge and wisdom are hidden in Him (Col 2:3), man cannot possess one crumb of knowledge without dependence upon God.

Of course, such an absolute claim of authority is offensive in the highest degree, especially to the postmodern mindset. Postmodern man cherishes his independence. He enjoys his autonomy. The last thing he wants to hear is that he is dependent on God for his knowledge. As a result, much language used in arguing with postmoderns is significantly more diffident and cautious; it omits such radical claims. However, rather than endearing believers to the unbeliever, this posture serves only to show him that he does not really need God in order to have knowledge. It allows him to view God as simply an interesting proposition he can evaluate by his own independent standards, but not as the Lord of the universe demanding intellectual repentance.

Phillips and Okholm suggest a somewhat minimalistic approach in their introduction to *Christian Apologetics in a Postmodern World*: "In a postmodern cultural milieu, where universal norms and totalizing metanarratives are suspect from the outset, the church must first persuade its audience that Christianity has

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<sup>38</sup>Examples of this abound, but I'll offer just two. Gary Habermas in his debate with Antony Flew over the resurrection concludes only that "the resurrection is a probable historical event" (Terry L Miethe, ed., *Did Jesus Rise From the Dead? The Resurrection Debate* 23). William Lane Craig ("Philosophical and Scientific Pointers to *Creation Ex Nihilo*," *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, Geivett and Sweetman, eds. [New York: Oxford University, 1992]) declares that seeing God as the cause of the universe is "eminently more plausible" (196).

something important to say and should be heard; only then should the church suggest that it *might* be true.”<sup>39</sup> Contrast this to the words of Van Til as he comments on “minimalistic” argumentation:

I consider this a compromise of simple and fundamental Biblical truth. It is an insult to the living God to say that his revelation of himself so lacks in clarity that man, himself through and through revelation of God, does justice by it when he says that God *probably* exists. . . . Christianity is the only reasonable position to hold. It is not merely as reasonable as other positions, or a bit more reasonable than other positions; it alone is the rational and reasonable position for man to take.<sup>40</sup>

Christ’s Lordship in the area of knowledge, as in all areas, is absolute. Until Christians understand this and implement it into argumentation, they will have difficulty maintaining the sufficiency of Scripture in apologetics.

**Theological Not Just Philosophical**

If apologetics, at its core, is a battle of worldviews, then the Christian defender of the faith must understand and be able to coherently expound his *own* worldview. Thus, the apologetic enterprise is ultimately a theological and biblical one.<sup>41</sup> The defender of the faith must not be able just to reproduce tricky little arguments and nice Christian catch phrases. Rather he must be immersed in the Word of God and its core teachings so that he is able to compare and contrast his worldview with that of his opponent. So, the apologist who recognizes the sufficiency of Scripture in his defense is as much a trained theologian as he is a trained philosopher. Consider the words of John Whitcomb:

The Christian who will be most effectively used by God in winning people to Christ is not necessarily the one who knows the most about secular philosophy, psychology, history, archaeology, or natural science . . . but rather the Christian who knows most about God’s Word and who humbly seeks God’s daily strength and wisdom in obeying it. The best Christian apologist is the best student of Scripture.<sup>42</sup>

Christians are not just defending some generic “god” or vague “theism.” Rather, they are advocates of a distinctively Christian perception of reality. The defender of the faith who understands the sufficiency of Scripture does not see

<sup>39</sup>Phillips and Okholm, *Christian Apologetics* 16 [emphasis added].

<sup>40</sup>Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* 197 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>41</sup>This is not to imply that philosophy is unimportant or harmful to the apologetic task. On the contrary, a strong philosophical background is a tremendous asset to defending the faith. However, I think all would agree that theology is foremost in the apologetic process since the Bible is our foremost authority.

<sup>42</sup>John C. Whitcomb, Jr., “Contemporary Apologetics and the Christian Faith, Part II: Christian Apologetics and the Divine Solution,” *BSac* 134 (1977):201-2.

theology as a mere addendum to apologetics; rather he sees apologetics as the very application of theology. To defend the Scriptures is to know and use the Scriptures.

### **Conclusion**

The apostle Paul warned, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8, NIV). Paul recognizes in this warning that only two kinds of thinking exist: thinking that is founded on Christ and thinking that is founded on the “principles of this world.” It has been the purpose of this essay to warn—as does Paul—against any method of apologetics that seeks to maintain so-called neutral thinking as it defends the faith.

In contrast to this sort of approach, this discussion has insisted that Christians must use the Bible not only as the foundation of theology, but also as the foundation for defense. If the Scriptures are really the highest authority in the universe, no other epistemological justification for the Bible’s truth exists other than its own self-attesting authority. If Christians insist on a neutral starting point and fail to challenge their opponents’ intellectual loyalties, the results will hardly be a surprise: non-Christian presuppositions will lead to non-Christian interpretations and ultimately to non-Christian conclusions.

Arguing presuppositionally allows Christians to go beyond arguing over what science proves or does not prove or what history means or does not mean, and takes them one step further: it cuts the legs from under the unbeliever’s argument by showing him that his worldview negates the possibility of knowledge at all. Thus, Christians have no reason to fear using the Bible as the ultimate authority in apologetics. When asked how they know Christianity is true, they can confidently say, “Because the Bible tells me so.”