

Presuppositional Apologetics: An Introduction

by John M. Frame

Part 1 of 2: Introduction and “Creation”

In defending the Christian faith, the most important question before us is “What sort of defense will best glorify our God (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31)?” God forbid that in seeking to defend the faith before others we should in that very act compromise it.

The so-called “presuppositional”¹ school of apologetics is concerned above all with answering this question. Of course, there are other questions in apologetics which, although of less ultimate importance, also deserve answers. Presuppositionalists have discussed those too. But in view of our space limitation, and in order to do justice to the main thrust of presuppositionalism, I must focus our attention on this most important question and then as space permits relate some other issues to this one.

Among all the sources of divine revelation (including nature, history, human beings in God’s image), Scripture plays a central role. Indeed, though the point cannot be argued in detail here, my view is that Scripture is the supremely authoritative, inerrant Word of God, the divinely authored, written constitution of

¹ I am not enthusiastic about this term. It tends to connote an opposition between “presuppositions” and “evidences” that is foreign to my own thinking, and it obscures important differences among the various so-called presuppositionalists, especially between Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark. Still, I will use it (henceforth without quotation marks) in deference to the prevailing usage. It should be noted that although I am deeply influenced by other presuppositionalists, especially Van Til, I shall in this essay take responsibility to expound only my own position, which differs from the others in some particulars. For a more elaborate presentation of my epistemology, see my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) (henceforth, DKG). For other presuppositional thinkers, see especially Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955, rev. ed., 1963, 1967), and Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952). Note also my *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 1994), and *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 1995).

the church of Jesus Christ.² Scripture is therefore the foundational authority for all of human life including apologetics. As the ultimate authority, the very Word of God, it provides the foundational justifications for all our reasoning,³ without itself being subject to prior justification.

Therefore, in seeking an apologetic which glorifies God, we must ask first of all what Scripture says on the subject. Of course, we will not find “apologetics” in any biblical concordance. But Scripture does say quite a bit about human knowledge of God and about the differences between belief and unbelief, matters of central importance to apologetics.

The message of Scripture may be summarized in three great facts: creation, fall and redemption. Each of these has important implications for apologetics.

I. CREATION

A. The Word of God vs. Mere Creaturely Wisdom

God has made all creatures, including ourselves, for his own glory. He is the lord; we are his servants. Lordship involves authority, and God’s ultimate lordship entails absolute authority. When God speaks, human beings must hear and obey. God defined Adam’s life-purpose by giving him a command (Gen. 1:28ff.), and the fall was disobedience to God’s Word (Gen. 2:16ff.; 3:11). The curse on post-fall life, as well as the promise of redemption, is defined by God’s Word (Gen. 3:14-19). The human race is preserved from judgment by one man’s obedience to God’s Word (Gen. 6:9–8:19) and is reconstituted by God’s promises (8:20–9:17). Abraham is called out of his country by the Word of God (Gen. 12:1ff.), and his faith is a faith in God’s spoken promise (Gen. 15:1-21; 17:1-22; 18:13ff.; Rom. 4:18-21; Heb. 11:8-19). Over and over again, Israel is told to keep every command that comes from God’s mouth (Deut. 4:1-14; 5:30-33; 6:1-9; 7:11-16;⁴ Josh. 1:8ff.; Ps. 1; 12:6; 19:7-11; 119; Isa. 8:20).

² See my “Scripture Speaks For Itself,” in John W. Montgomery, ed., *God’s Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1973), also Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

³ See DKG, 123-139, also I, A, below.

⁴ Nearly every chapter of Deuteronomy contains admonitions to keep the “laws, commands, decrees, testimonies, statutes, ordinances . . .” The rich redundancy of terms underscores the point.

The New Testament, far from rejecting this emphasis on the authority of God's Word, endorses the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures (Matt. 4:4; 5:17-20; John 5:45ff.; 10:35; Rom. 3:1ff.; 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:15-17; James 1:22-25; 2:8-12; 4:11; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). It also presents us with new Words from God, the words of Jesus and the apostles. These too are words of absolute authority, and obeying them is a matter of life or death (Jesus: Matt. 7:21-29; Mark 8:38; Luke 8:21; John 6:63-68; 8:47; 12:47ff.; 14:15,21,23ff.; 15:7,10,14; 17:6; 1 John 2:3-5; 3:22; 5:2ff.; 2 John 6; the apostles: Rom. 1:16ff.; 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:10-13; 4:1; 14:37; Gal. 1:1,8ff.,11ff.,16; 2:2; Eph. 3:3; 2 Pet. 3:16; Rev. 1:11).⁵

So we live under God's authority. Among other things, this means that we are to draw a sharp distinction between the Word of God and fallen human wisdom.⁶ Deuteronomy 18:20 pronounces a curse upon a would-be prophet who "presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say." Isaiah 29:13 attacks the people as hypocrites because "their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men." Jesus quotes this passage in Matthew 15:8ff. and Mark 7:6ff. in his attack upon the "traditions" of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Paul attacks those who submit to human ethical rules as if they were God's (Col. 2:20-23; cf. Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 8-10). See also Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; 15:33; Ecclesiastes 12:13ff.; Isaiah 33:6; Jeremiah 7:24; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17; 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16; 3:18-23. To confuse God's Words with mere human words is to leave ourselves with no clear divine authority.

Someone might object that in fact it is not possible to distinguish sharply between divine and human words. After all, do we not rely on our human senses and reason to understand and distinguish the Words of God? How, then, can the Word of God be set sharply against human wisdom as our sole ultimate authority? Must we not regard our own minds as in some sense the criterion by which the Word of God is measured? Is it not the case, then, that *our* thoughts, *our* words are of necessity the final authority? By way of reply: (1) As we have seen, Scripture says there is a difference between God's Words and ours, and it implies that we are able to discern that difference and to judge our words by

⁵ I wish that I could do more than simply list these "proof-texts," but, again, space is the problem. I would urge readers who have questions in these areas to study these passages carefully in context. See also the articles by Kline and myself mentioned in an earlier note.

⁶ Even if man had not fallen, he would still be obliged to submit his thinking to God's Word, as was Adam, Gen. 2:17. The fact of the fall, however, introduces a discrepancy between God's wisdom and man's which otherwise would not have existed. See texts below.

God's. Even if we cannot answer the objection, therefore, we must believe (on blind faith if nothing else) that it *can* be answered, if we are to believe in biblical authority at all.

(2) In fact, human senses and reason are themselves means of God's revelation. Human beings are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Therefore our rational faculties, rightly used, will not lead us away from God's Word, but rather toward it. Those faculties will not lead us to compromise the authority of God's Word; rather, by bringing the Word into our minds and hearts, they will make that authority all the more inescapable. Scripture never suggests that human reasoning about the Word, in itself, leads us to substitute the authority of reason for the authority of the Word. On the contrary, to think about the Word is to bring ourselves more consciously under its threats and promises.

(3) There is a further problem here, namely the effects of sin upon our rational processes. I shall discuss that in more detail later. But even our sinful distortion of God's Word does not prevent it from getting through to us at some level. Even pagans, with no Scripture and only "general revelation" available to them, though they repress the truth and exchange it for a lie, nevertheless "know God" (Rom. 1:21); they know the reality, nature and law of the one whom they seek to avoid (Rom. 1:18-20,32). God's Word comes upon them in its full authority.

(4) Believers know from experience that God's Word has the power to cut across and through our most carefully worked out rationalizations. Often we dream up elaborate theological constructions, even schemes of biblical hermeneutics, attempting to make Scripture say what we want it to say; but time and again Scripture rebukes these projects. It shows that it will not be forced into our mold. The Word is *powerful* (Isa. 55:11; Rom. 1:16; Heb. 4:12ff.). Sometimes, then, Scripture forces us to give up our rational schemes, showing that it is capable of governing our rational processes at the deepest level. Other times, to be sure, we resist this pressure of Scripture and maintain our schemes anyway; but can't we see now that such resistance is disobedience? It is certainly not a hermeneutical or rational necessity. God's Word is powerful, and he has made the human mind to be accessible to that Word. A proper hermeneutic is one that seeks itself to be governed by Scripture, and one which we hold loosely enough that we may allow Scripture to correct it.

(5) Analysis of the nature of our rational faculties leads to the conclusion that these faculties themselves are not autonomous. They are not suited to serve as ultimate judges of anything; rather, their nature is to point to an ultimate judge beyond themselves. Sense experience often errs, and human reason does too.

And neither our senses nor our reason supplies, by itself, a criterion of truth, a standard by which we may discern whether any statement is true or false. Rather, that criterion must be supplied to it by the person who senses or reasons. In other words, reason won't teach you anything unless you supply the premises for its rational arguments, any more than a computer can teach you anything without a program.⁷

(6) One may, therefore, distinguish a Christian from a non-Christian use of reason. Christians will supply their reasoning with biblical premises. For them, what is reasonable, in the final analysis, is what God says. Therefore, in a *Christian* epistemology, there can in principle be no conflict between our reasoning and God's Word, however much our sin may distort the harmony between them.

The objection, therefore, fails. Human reasoning is not suited to be the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, even though we do use human reasoning to discern what is God's Word and to ascertain its meaning. The reasoning by which we discern what God's Word is and by which we ascertain its meaning ought to be *Christian* reasoning, reasoning operating on Christian premises, reasoning which is itself subject to the Word of God.⁸ God's Word, not human reason, is the ultimate criterion.

B. God's Word Our Presupposition

Once we have made the distinction between God's Word and the "imagination of our own hearts," God calls us to live according to the former. God's Word is true (therefore dependable), though every human authority may lie (Rom. 3:4). If we adopt the Word of God as our ultimate commitment, our ultimate standard, our ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, God's Word then

⁷ See the books by Frame, Van Til and Clark noted earlier for more considerations along this line. Also the influential book by Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, second edition, 1970). Kuhn does not write from a Christian perspective, but he, together with a number of other Christian and secular thinkers, has concluded that reason (even in the seemingly "objective" form of scientific thought) is not a "neutral" enterprise but depends very much on the prior commitments of the thinker. See also the works of Michael Polanyi, Norwood R. Hanson, Herman Dooyeweerd.

⁸ There is, of course, a kind of circularity here which I shall discuss at a later point. See C, 3, below.

becomes our “presupposition.” That is to say, since we use it to evaluate all other beliefs, we must regard it as more certain than any other beliefs.

Noah had no empirical evidence that the world would be destroyed by a flood, only the evidence of the Word of God; but by grace he believed God (Gen. 6:8,22; Heb. 11:7). Others heard that Word, but rejected it (2 Pet. 2:5), doubtless often with laughter. Abraham believed God, even though the apparent empirical evidence contradicted God’s Word. God said he and Sarah would have a son, even though both were well into old age (Gen. 18:10-15). Sarah laughed; but Paul commends Abraham’s unwavering faith in God’s Word despite the temptation to disbelieve (Rom. 4:20ff.).

The New Testament commends those who believe even without empirical signs (John 20:29), and it condemns those who refuse to believe without such signs (Matt. 12:39; 16:1ff.; 1 Cor. 1:22). There is a difference between walking by faith and walking by sight (2 Cor. 5:7, Heb. 11). The world says, “Seeing is believing”; Jesus says “if you believed you would see the glory of God” (John 11:40).

C. Problems

1. The Psychology of Presupposing

I admit that it is difficult to construe the psychology of such faith. How is it that people come to believe a Word from God which contradicts all their other normal means of knowledge? How did Abraham come to know that the voice calling him to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22:1-18; cf. Heb. 11:17-19; James 2:21-24) was the voice of God? What the voice told him to do was contrary to fatherly instincts, normal ethical considerations, and even, apparently, contrary to other Words of God (Gen. 9:6). But he obeyed the voice and was blessed. Closer to our own experience: how is it that people come to believe in Jesus even though they have not, like Thomas, seen Jesus’ signs and wonders (John 20:29)?

I cannot explain the psychology here to the satisfaction of very many. In this case as in others (for we walk by faith, not by sight!) we may have to accept the fact even without an explanation of the fact. Somehow, God manages to get his Word across to us, despite the logical and psychological barriers. Without explaining how it works, Scripture describes in various ways a “supernatural factor” in divine-human communication. (a) It speaks of the *power* of the Word. The Word created all things (Gen. 1:3, etc.; Ps. 33:3-6; John 1:3) and directs the course of nature and history (Pss. 46:6; 148:5-8). What God says will surely

come to pass (Isa. 55:11; Gen. 18:14;⁹ Deut. 18:21ff.). The gospel is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom. 1:16; cf. Isa. 6:9-10; Luke 7:7ff.; Heb. 4:12). (b) Scripture also speaks of the personal power of the *Holy Spirit* operating *with* the Word (John 3:5; 1 Cor. 2:4,12ff.; 2 Cor. 3:15-18; 1 Thess. 1:5).¹⁰ Mysterious though the process may be, somehow God illumines the human mind to discern the divine source of the Word. We know without knowing how we know.¹¹

2. The Content of Our Presuppositions

What, precisely, is the content of the believer’s presupposition? I have thus far spoken generally of “presupposing the Word of God.” In one sense, our presupposition is simply the Word of God itself, which for us is the content of Scripture.

But of course believers vary in their knowledge of the Word of God. Our understandings of it always contain some degree of error, and we never reach an exhaustive knowledge of everything in Scripture (together, of course, with its proper implications and applications).¹² Therefore there is some change, some development in our appropriation and use of our presupposition.

Since I believe that infants can be regenerate, I hold that it is possible to belong to Christ without having any *formulated* presupposition at all. But those who belong to Jesus always have at least a *disposition* to serve him, a disposition which becomes a growing obedience as they mature in Christ. As they learn to use words and concepts, they learn to obey his Words, written and preached. As they learn more and more of his Words, and gain more and more certainty about the applications of those Words, they are able to obey more and more of them. And obeying involves presupposing; for one thing God commands is for us to give his Words priority above all others.

⁹ Literally, “no Word of God shall be void of power.”

¹⁰ For more on the work of the Spirit with the Word, see John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in Ned Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, eds., *The Infallible Word* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), 1-54, also my “The Spirit and the Scriptures,” in Donald Carson and John Woodbridge, eds., *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 213-235.

¹¹ A parallel would be the evangelical doctrine of biblical inspiration: we know that Scripture is God’s Word, but we know very little about the process by which God inspires the biblical writers and texts.

¹² In my book cited earlier, I argue that the applications of Scripture are its meaning; so one cannot properly argue that he “knows the Bible” except to the degree that he knows the proper applications of the Bible to all situations.

In one sense all Christians presuppose God's entire Word; for they are ruled by a Spirit-given desire to follow Jesus, wherever he leads. Our specific applications of this presupposition, however, change over time, as we grow in our appreciation and understanding of what God has said. Indeed, some of our applications may require correction. Doctrinal ideas may have to be corrected by other doctrinal ideas as we seek a more consistently biblical perspective. Many specific applications of our presupposition, therefore, are corrigible. On the other hand, many such applications are not. Some of these would be the existence of God, the deity of Christ, his incarnation, his atonement and resurrection, his return in glory. It is, I think, impossible in an adult believer of normal intelligence to separate these doctrinal beliefs from the generic disposition to follow Jesus; the beliefs and the disposition, surely, are equally authoritative, equally incorrigible.

There are changes, therefore, in the believer's thinking over time. But the presupposition itself, the general disposition to follow Jesus, plus those beliefs which are inseparable from that disposition, persist through these changes. Indeed, they serve as the ultimate test of what changes should be made.

The term "presupposition," then, applies, first, to our fundamental disposition to follow Jesus, and also to those fundamental doctrinal beliefs inseparably associated with that disposition. It may also apply in a secondary sense to changeable doctrinal beliefs: At the moment, I am convinced of the doctrine of infant baptism, and that belief often functions as a presupposition in my discussions, say, of the nature of the church. Yet I can easily imagine changing my position on baptism if someone presents me with a strong biblical argument on the other side.

There are therefore many differences among Christians as to what doctrines, precisely, take on presuppositional force. In general, whatever one believes with certainty to be scriptural takes on that character for him: for if a doctrine is scriptural, that is what Jesus expects us to believe, and therefore we must believe it. "God desires the sacrifice of Isaac" was not originally one of Abraham's presuppositions. When he became convinced (somehow!) that God wanted that, that proposition entered his presuppositional circle. After the angel appeared to end the episode, that proposition, for another reason, departed from his list of presuppositions. Different believers have different experiences, different rates of growth, different ups and downs, and, hence, different secondary presuppositions. But they are united in many fundamental doctrines and especially in their primary disposition to serve Jesus; hence they are united in presupposing that Jesus is the lord who deserves our unqualified allegiance.

3. Circularity

That presupposed allegiance rules our thinking, as it rules all other aspects of life. And since Christian presuppositions underlie all of the Christian's reasoning, then our argument for the truth of Christianity itself must be, in a certain sense, circular. We should try to understand what that "certain sense" is. It is not that we are reduced to saying "Christianity is true because it is true," or any such nonsense. Rather, the argument is circular in that it appeals to criteria of truth and rationality which are themselves Christian in that they accord with Christian presuppositions. But if that is true, then we are presenting an argument that assumes from the outset that Christianity is true; it assumes, in other words, the conclusion it attempts to prove.

Now normally "circular argument" is considered a fallacy. This particular type of circularity, however, I believe, is not a fallacy, but a necessity of human thought. Consider the following:

(a) All valid arguments are circular in a similar way. In the syllogism "All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal," the conclusion is *implicit* already in the premises. Similarly for inductive arguments, even though in them the conclusion goes beyond the premises. For even in an inductive argument the premises must necessarily be *compatible with* the truth of the conclusion, not least in the criteria of rationality and truth to which they are responsible.

(b) Arguments for religions and philosophical systems are arguments for *world views*. A world view is a general account of all reality, an understanding of the most basic features of the universe. All arguments for the truth of world views (whether religious, philosophical, political, scientific or whatever) must presuppose standards of rationality consistent with those world views. All such arguments, therefore, are circular in a way similar to ours.

(c) That is especially the case because world views typically include criteria of truth, rightness, rationality, etc. But all *arguments* for such criteria must be from the outset consistent with those criteria. Indeed, such arguments must appeal to, and therefore presuppose, the criteria in question. For to what else can they appeal? This kind of circularity is not limited to Christianity; it is obvious in other world views as well. A philosophical rationalist, for instance, one who believes that human reason is the supreme arbiter of truth, must, ultimately, prove his point by appealing to human reason. Similarly for an empiricist, a subjectivist, a Muslim, a Buddhist, or whoever. Why, then, should anyone be surprised that a

Christian would seek to prove his world view by appealing to the Bible, his ultimate criterion of truth?

It seems to me, therefore, that far from being a fallacy, this sort of circular argument is necessary for anyone who seeks to argue on behalf of a broad world view, particularly one which includes distinctive criteria of rationality and truth.¹³

4. Persuasion

But how, one may well ask, can such a circular argument be persuasive to people who are outside the circle? If someone is unwilling to accept Christian criteria of rationality, truth and knowledge, how can the Christian expect him to be persuaded by an argument which presupposes these criteria?

We must remember, first of all, that this problem is not unique to Christianity; it is a problem for everyone who argues for some system of ideas which includes distinctive epistemic criteria. Indeed, it is a problem which appears in human life more often than we might suppose. How often has each of us tried to argue with someone who seems to be on an entirely different “wavelength” from ourselves, someone who doesn’t seem to respond to normal reasoning, but whose thoughts follow a strange order which we cannot comprehend?

To take an extreme case: Imagine a student so blindly paranoid that he thinks all his professors are out to kill him.¹⁴ He resists evidence to the contrary, twisting it so that it reinforces his presupposition. You remind him of Professor A who treated the student kindly. The student replies, “Professor A was only trying to gain my confidence so that it would be easier for him to murder me. In fact, why would Professor A have been so kind, if he did not have such a nefarious motive? Professor A’s kindness *proves* his murderous intent!” Imagine that the student consistently employs such reasoning.

Obviously, the student has an erroneous world view which has deeply affected his powers of reason. His very criteria of truth and rationality are distorted. He will not believe anything that disagrees with his presupposition that the professors are out to kill him. Thus his reasoning is circular in the sense

¹³ Kuhn, in the book mentioned earlier, acknowledges the circularity, in this sense, of scientific arguments.

¹⁴ Example adapted from R. M. Hare, his contribution to “Theology and Falsification,” in Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre, eds., *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (N. Y.: Macmillan, 1955), 99-103.

defined earlier. He has a distinctive concept of rationality, by which he tests all arguments, all evidence. Since most of us do not accept this system, we are outside of his circle and he is outside of ours. How, then, do we communicate? What kind of argument can we bring against him?

Well, what do we normally do in such situations? Surely we do not accept *his* system, *his* criterion of truth, and argue on the basis of that! To do so would simply reinforce his conclusion. Nor do we try to find some “neutral ground,” some criterion which is favorable neither to his presupposition nor to ours; for there is no such neutral ground. One must either presuppose that all professors are trying to kill the student, or one must reject that presupposition. What we do, and what we should do, is simply to argue on the basis of *our own* standard of truth. How can that be persuasive to the paranoid? Well, perhaps it won't be. But we argue in the hope that at some level of his consciousness he is still in touch with reality. And we hope, indeed pray, that if we press that reality upon him sharply enough, that reality might penetrate his system, rebuking his distortions, redirecting his perverted mind. That hope may be slender, but it is the only hope we have. And sometimes that hope is rewarded. For indeed, paranoids do sometimes emerge from their paranoia. Sometimes they are persuaded. In such cases the argument is circular, but persuasive nonetheless.

In the final analysis, this is what we do, and should do, in any argument with someone who differs with us on fundamental standards. We do not, we cannot, reason on his basis or on “neutral” criteria. Rather we reason on our own basis, in hope. And sometimes the argument persuades, despite the other's resistance to our standards. Now these principles apply very well to Christian apologetics. The Christian apologist, too, must avoid adopting the systems of his opponents, or the pretense of standing on “neutral” ground. He loves Jesus Christ, and therefore he cannot escape being “biased.” His only alternative is to speak the truth as he knows it, in hope and prayer. Nothing can be any more persuasive than that. And, as we shall see in the next section, there are, according to Scripture, many parallels between non-Christians and our hypothetical paranoid.