

# APOLOGETICS: GIVING A REASON FOR OUR HOPE

TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (PCA)

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# OVERVIEW

- Survey of Contemporary Approaches to Apologetics
  - Basic Motto and summary of the method
  - Rationale of the method
  - Evaluation of strengths and weaknesses
  - Qualifier: idealized descriptions of the method
- The Five Approaches
  - Classical Apologetics
  - Evidentialist Apologetics
  - Fideist Apologetics
  - Presuppositional Apologetics
  - Eclectic Apologetics

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Basic motto: “Faith based on reason.”
  - Central idea: The truth claims of Christianity can be proved by human reason and logic.
    - The way to defend Christianity is to show that Christianity is supported by reason.
  - Human Reason: a universal, God-given faculty
    - An intellectual compass that points us towards the truth and away from falsehood
    - Every human being, believer and unbeliever, has the faculty of reason that allows them to evaluate truth claims, and if you apply reason to the truth claims of the Christian faith, it will be vindicated.

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Two-stage approach
  - Stage 1: Show that God exists using traditional theistic arguments
    - Ontological argument
    - Cosmological argument
    - Teleological argument
    - Moral argument
  - Goal of this stage: establish theism (a Supreme, Perfect, Self-existent Being)

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Stage 1: Show that God exists using traditional theistic arguments
  - Ontological argument: God is by definition a perfect being; a perfect being cannot fail to exist; therefore, God exists.
    - The argument moves from God's perfection to God's existence.

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Stage 1: Show that God exists using traditional theistic arguments
  - Cosmological argument: the universe is contingent (exists, but might not have existed); therefore it requires a cause. There has to be at some point a first cause – something that causes everything else but is itself uncaused because it is self-existent.
    - Main idea: Anything that exists but might not have existed needs an explanation. You can't have an infinite chain of causes. At some point you must have a self-existent being you caused everything else to exist.

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Stage 1: Show that God exists using traditional theistic arguments
  - Teleological (design) argument: the apparent design of the universe points to a designer; therefore there must be a designer.
    - Example: William Paley's watch analogy

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Stage 1: Show that God exists using traditional theistic arguments
  - Moral argument: objective moral laws point to a transcendent law-giver.
- Goal of this stage: establish theism



# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Stage 2: once theism is established, show that Jesus is the Son of God using historical (evidential) arguments.
  - Goal of this stage: to narrow theism to Christian theism.

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Stage 2: once theism is established, show that Jesus is the Son of God using historical (evidential) arguments.
  - Preliminary argument: the Gospels are at least generally historically reliable.
  - Argument from prophecy: Jesus was foretold in the OT.
  - Argument from character: Jesus was a morally perfect teacher.
  - Argument from miracles: Jesus' miracles point to his divine status.
  - Argument from resurrection: Jesus' resurrection confirms his claim to be divine.

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

“Traditional apologetics is in two stages: the first considers natural revelation, the second, supernatural revelation. We have considered natural revelation which proves the existence of God. Now we turn to supernatural revelation. First, we will show that a presumed uninspired Bible proves inspired messengers. Second, these inspired messengers prove the Bible to be in fact inspired. The many points and sub-points of this chapter all aim to establish this linear, two-step movement.” (R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*)

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

“The methodology of classical apologetics was first to present arguments for theism, which aimed to show that God’s existence is at least more probable than not, and then to present Christian evidences, probabilistically construed, for God’s revelation in Christ.” (William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*)

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- “We can show that Christian theism is true by presenting arguments for theism [stage 1] and evidences for a specifically Christian theism [stage 2], 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.” (William Lane Craig, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*)
  - Note: classical apologists do not think you argue someone to faith.

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Rationale for Classical Apologetics (reasons given for adopting the approach)
  - Historical pedigree
  - Straightforward logical structure
  - You have to use premises and assumptions that are acceptable to the non-Christian
    - Relying on a distinctly Christian worldview begs the question
    - If you want to talk to an unbeliever, you must start with some common base of truth that is acceptable for believer and unbeliever (this common base is taken to be *religiously neutral*)
    - The neutral grounds: laws of logic, laws of probability, principles of causation, basic reliability of sense experience, commonly accepted principles of historical investigation)

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Evaluation

- Discussion: What are the *strengths* of Classical Apologetics?

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Evaluation

- Discussion: What are the strengths of Classical Apologetics?

- (1) Classical apologetics has a strong historical pedigree

- (2) The two-stage approach is simple enough to understand

- (3) CA purports to rely only on universally (or widely) accepted principles of reason

- (4) CA offers itself as an objective approach to defending Christianity

- (5) Many of the arguments seem to be sound (logically valid with true premises)



# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

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- Discussion: What are the *weaknesses* of Classical Apologetics?

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- Discussion: What are the weaknesses of Classical Apologetics?

- (1) CA pays insufficient attention to the noetic effects of sin.

- (2) CA assumes that everyone agrees about the basic principles of reason.

- (3) CA *can* give the impression that God's revelation is unclear.

- (4) CA, as typically practiced, gives the impression that *human reason is religiously neutral* (that some aspects of the human experience are independent of worldview)

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Evaluation

- Discussion: What are the weaknesses of Classical Apologetics?

- (5) In the second stage of its case for Christianity, CA seems to hold the rationality of the Christian faith hostage to the methods and conclusions of secular historians.

- (6) It seems inconsistent for a Christian apologist, committed to a Christian theory of knowledge, to ask an unbeliever to treat the Bible *just like any other ancient document*.

- (7) Classicalists fail to recognize that it is possible to argue for the Christian worldview in a way that (a) doesn't beg the question yet (b) doesn't assume neutrality or autonomy.

# EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

- Basic motto: “Faith based on evidence.”
- Basic approach: A one-stage approach to demonstrating that Christianity is *most probably* true.
  - Show that Christianity offers the most probable explanation for our total evidence (mostly observational evidence).
  - When all the evidence is examined, Christianity offers the most plausible explanation.
    - Evidence from the existence of the physical universe
    - Evidence from the fine-tuning of the physical universe
    - Evidence from the origins of life
    - Evidence from apparent design in biology

# EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

- Show that Christianity offers the most probable explanation for our total evidence.
  - Evidence from human consciousness and human values
  - Evidence from religious experience in general
  - Evidence from miracles (esp. Jesus' miracles)
  - Evidence from biblical prophecies
  - Evidence from the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth
  - Evidence from the testimony of the early Christians
  - Evidence from the history of the Christian church

## EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

“Instead of having to prove God’s existence *before* moving to specific evidences (the ‘two-step’ method), the evidentialist treats one or more historical arguments as being able both to indicate God’s existence and activity and to indicate which variety of theism is true. ... [Evidentialists] are still separate from classical apologists in that they think that a one-step argument from historical evidences (such as miracles) to God is feasible, and they often use this as their favorite argument.” (Gary R. Habermas, “Evidential Apologetics,” *Five Views on Apologetics*)

# EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

- Rationale for Approach (reasons for adopting this approach)
  - As a general principle, factual questions are settled by an appeal to evidence.
  - Christians need to answer the skeptical challenge: “Not enough evidence!”
  - Christianity can be demonstrated scientifically like any other hypothesis.
    - The truth of Christianity can be tested with observational evidence.
  - Christianity can be vindicated according to scholarly standards of historical research.
  - The NT places particular emphasis on the evidential significance of the resurrection.
  - You can incorporate more evidence into the argument as it becomes available.

# EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

- What are the *strengths* of Evidentialist Apologetics?



# EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

- What are the *strengths* of Evidentialist Apologetics?

(1) Evidentialist Apologetics offers a familiar and intuitive approach to proving factual claims.

(2) Evidentialist Apologetics also offers an approach that appears to be objective and amenable to fair-minded unbelievers.

(3) The NT suggests that certain empirical observations do indeed give evidence for the claims of Jesus and the apostles.

(4) It is possible to make a strong historical case for the Resurrection, certainly one that strikes many Christians as compelling.

(5) It makes a lot of sense to focus on the Resurrection as the defining miracle of the Christian faith (cf. 1 Cor. 15).

# EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

- What are the *weaknesses* of Evidentialist Apologetics?
  - (1) Evidentialist Apologetics pays insufficient attention to the *noetic effects of sin*.
  - (2) In its purest form, Evidentialist Apologetics fails to recognize that not every belief can be (or needs to be) justified by evidence.
  - (3) Evidentialist Apologetics often doesn't do justice to the fact that evidence is always interpreted within a particular worldview.

# EVIDENTIALIST APOLOGETICS

- What are the *weaknesses* of Evidentialist Apologetics?

(4) Evidentialist Apologetics appears to compromise the self-attesting nature of Scripture by suggesting that we should accept the Bible only if its content meets certain *external evidential standards*.

(5) A major weakness of Evidentialist Apologetics is highlighted in Jesus' parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

(6) Evidentialist Apologetics (as it's usually presented) seems to require Christians to adopt a different epistemology for *apologetics* (a 'neutral' one that brackets out special revelation) than for everything else.

(7) Evidentialist Apologetics tends to fall flat when dealing with unbelievers who have a more *postmodernist* mindset (i.e., those who tend to think that how one interpret facts, evidences, and truth claims depends on one's personal perspective).

# FIDEIST APOLOGETICS

- Basic Motto: Faith beyond Reason
- Basic Approach: a predominately negative approach to defending Christianity
  - The Christian faith can be defended against intellectual arguments in two ways:
    - (1) Show that the objections fail by the standards of reason
    - (2) Show that the standards of reason do not apply to faith

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- **Basic Motto: “Reason based on faith.”**
  - Human reason actually depends on Christianity. Human reason is vindicated by the Christian faith, not the other way around.
  - Our ability to reason actually presupposes the Christian worldview; human reason is only possible if the Christian worldview is true.
  - When unbelievers engage in rational debate with believers, they unwittingly presuppose the biblical worldview.
- **Basic Approach: a two-step approach to proving that the Christian worldview is the only rational position**
  - Step 1: Show that the non-Christian’s worldview is self-defeating. By their own standards, unbelieving worldviews undermine rational thought, knowledge, morality, etc.
  - Step 2: Show that the Christian worldview can account for what unbelieving worldviews assume but have no basis for.

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- Question: What exactly is a presupposition?
  - Objective presupposition: something that must be true in order for other claims to be true – or even meaningful.
    - Illustration: “The king of France was rightly condemned for his brazen lies.”
      - What objective presuppositions must be true in order for that statement to be true or even meaningful?
  - Subjective presupposition: a foundational commitment or conviction that guides your beliefs, your judgments, your reasoning, your interpretation of evidence, and your actions.
    - Example: Christians presuppose objective moral norms
    - Example: the naturalist presupposes that all causes are natural causes
    - Example: postmodernists presuppose that truth is a social construct
- Presuppositional apologetics aims to show the unbeliever that his subjective presuppositions are at odds with his objective presuppositions.

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- Rationale for the Approach (reasons for adopting this approach)
  - Christians should not try to argue for their faith from a *neutral* standpoint.
  - It is impossible to argue for *anything* from a neutral standpoint.
  - Both Christians and non-Christians have presuppositions that they bring to any debate.
  - How people interpret 'facts' and 'evidences' will depend on their presuppositions [worldview].

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- Rationale for the Approach (reasons for adopting this approach)
  - What people consider 'reasonable' or 'credible' will depend on their presuppositions [worldview].
    - You therefore cannot prove Christianity by a naïve appeal to 'reason'.
  - You have to refute the non-Christian's presuppositions in order to defend Christianity.
  - You also have to show the Christian's presuppositions cannot be likewise refuted.
  - Our apologetic method should *challenge* human autonomy rather than accommodate it.
  - Our apologetic method should be consistent with our doctrine of self-attesting Scripture.



# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- “The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge: If God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock.” (C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*)

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- “To put it in compressed form, apologetical disputes hinge on the conflicting presuppositions (worldview) of the believer and the unbeliever, but the believer can argue for the rationality of his presuppositions (and demonstrate the irrationality of the opposing outlook) by means of an ‘internal comparison and critique’ of the two contrary sets of presuppositions. This is what is known as an *indirect argument*—an argument ‘from the impossibility of the contrary.’ ... The two fundamental theories or worldviews must be compared, being analyzed ‘from within’ themselves, with a view to reducing to absurdity the position that opposes your own. The autonomous position of the unbeliever must be shown to be untenable on its own grounds.” (Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*)

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- What are the *strengths* of Presuppositional Apologetics?
  - (1) Presuppositionalists are surely correct that our method in apologetics has to be formulated in the context of a biblical epistemology.
  - (2) Given a biblical epistemology, Presuppositionalists are also right to reject “the myth of neutrality” and the notion that human reason is autonomous.
  - (3) Presuppositionalists are right to reject “the myth of neutrality” and the notion that human reason is autonomous.
  - (4) Presuppositional Apologetics should be commended for taking seriously the noetic effects of sin and the relationship between natural revelation and special revelation.

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- What are the *strengths* of Presuppositional Apologetics?

(5) Presuppositional Apologetics should be commended for its concern to avoid accommodating the unbeliever's assumed autonomy and to challenge it head-on as part of its apologetic argument.

(6) Presuppositional Apologetics should be commended for its concern to avoid undermining the self-authenticating nature of the Bible.

(7) Presuppositional Apologetics recognizes that everyone has a worldview that determines how they interpret and evaluate 'facts' and 'evidences'.

(8) Presuppositional Apologetics also recognizes that standards of truth and reason can vary across worldviews.

# PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

- What are the *weaknesses* of Presuppositional Apologetics?

(1) Presuppositional Apologists often seem to spend a lot more time talking about how to do apologetics than actually doing apologetics!

(2) Presuppositional Apologetics can be harder to understand than more traditional approaches to apologetics.

(4) Presuppositionalists can be very reluctant to use any kind of evidential argument (e.g., historical or scientific) or any philosophical argument other than TAG (e.g., traditional theistic arguments).

(5) Presuppositional Apologetics is sometimes stated in such a way that it seems to rule out any kind of apologetics, by ruling out any common ground between the believer and the unbeliever.

# ECLECTIC APOLOGETICS

- Basic Motto: *Take the Best, Leave the Rest*
- A best-tool-for-the-job approach to showing that Christianity is reasonable:
  - Use the best arguments from any apologetic tradition to meet any particular challenge.
    - Classical arguments to answer the question, “Why believe that God exists?”
    - Evidentialist arguments to answer the question, “Who was Jesus really?”
    - Presuppositional arguments to answer the question, “How can I accept miracles?”
    - Fideist arguments to answer the question, “Why isn’t there compelling evidence?”
    - Pragmatic arguments to answer the question, “Why should I care anyway?”

# ECLECTIC APOLOGETICS

- Rationale for the approach
  - The Bible doesn't endorse or require any particular approach to defending the faith.
  - Good arguments can be found in each of the different 'schools' of apologetics.
  - Christians should be *doing* apologetics rather than talking about doing apologetics!
- Representative Apologists
  - C. S. Lewis (1898–1963)
    - *Mere Christianity* (Fontana, 1955)
    - *Miracles* (Fontana, 1960)
    - *The Problem of Pain* (Fount Paperbacks, 1977)
  - Ravi Zacharias (1946–)
    - *Can Man Live Without God?* (Thomas Nelson, 1994)

# ECLECTIC APOLOGETICS

- What are the *strengths* of Eclectic Apologetics?
  - (1) An approach that advocates “the best tool for the job” makes good sense.
  - (2) Eclectic Apologetics isn’t restrictive in the way that other methods can be (which sometimes fall into formulaic one-size-fits-all approaches).
  - (3) Eclectics atypically out doing apologetics while everyone else is still inside talking about doing apologetics!



# ECLECTIC APOLOGETICS

- What are the *weaknesses* of Eclectic Apologetics?
  - (1) Eclectic Apologetics doesn't give much thought to apologetic method and to what implications a biblical worldview might have for how we should practice apologetics.
  - (2) A pragmatic approach to apologetics leads to a lack of coherence and sometimes a lack of discernment.
  - (3) The basic problem with Eclectic Apologetics is that it doesn't adequately connect *apologetics* with *theology*.

# CLASSICAL APOLOGETICS

- Survey of Contemporary Approaches to Apologetics
  - Classical Apologetics: “Faith based on reason.”
  - Evidentialist Apologetics: “Faith based on evidence.”
  - Fideist Apologetics: “Faith beyond reason.”
  - Presuppositional Apologetics: “Reason based on faith.”
  - Eclectic Apologetics: “Take the best, leave the rest.”