

Review of *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* by R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984. 364 pages. \$25.99.

Reviewed by Alex Soto

Believing that Enlightenment philosophers—especially David Hume and Immanuel Kant—have driven Christians away from rational apologetics, intellectually corralling them onto a fideist¹ reservation, *Classical Apologetics* was written to reverse this drive. The book has two aims: (a) to equip and encourage Christians to return to a rational defense of the faith, and (b) to critique the Presuppositional apologetic method taught by Cornelius Van Til.

I am afraid there is not much to commend in this book, however. Its *attitude* is praiseworthy: “Apologetics is a useful tool to shut the mouths of the obstreperous” (22). Apart from this, it is clear that the authors do not understand Van Til’s method; and with regard to their own method, Van Til’s words come to mind: “as Reformed theologians, we have not yet outgrown Rome’s natural theology entirely.”² Their method simply does not cohere with the Bible and Reformed Protestantism.

But before examining their method, I should clear up a few confused areas.

Areas of Confusion

Van Til

The ridiculous claims about Van Til make one suspicious of the authors’ scholarly credentials. They say he was a fideist (184–185) and that he advocated a “no-reasoned defense for Christianity” (16), despite the fact that Van Til spent his entire career *arguing* for Christianity (thus no fideist), and that his argument for Christianity involves deductive and inductive *reasoning*: “the Christian method uses neither the inductive nor the deductive method as understood by the opponents of Christianity, but that it has elements of both induction and deduction in it, if these terms are understood in a Christian sense.”³ The authors also seem to approve of Ronald Nash’s assessment of Van Til as one who revolts against logic (75). Rather, what Van Til revolted against was an autonomous use of logic, which amounts to placing God’s revelation on hold until it passes man’s *fallible* use of his *limited* understanding of logic. But logic thought of properly—as “the expression on a created level of the internal coherence of God’s nature”⁴—Van Til

¹ Fideism (*fides* is Latin for ‘faith’) “is the leap-of-faith syndrome which refuses to ground faith in any rational proof or evidence” (34). Sometimes, though, the authors speak of fideism as a denial of natural theology: “The *ism* of fideism negates a knowledge of God via natural theology” (27). According to this latter understanding we should all be fideists, inasmuch as natural theology has moral and methodological problems (see below).

² *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1972), 70.

³ Cornelius Van Til in Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1998), 516.

⁴ Van Til in Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 235.

heartily encouraged. In fact, “faith abhors the really contradictory; to maintain the really contradictory is to deny God,” he wrote.⁵

Probably the main cause of their confusion about Van Til is their failure to grasp transcendental reasoning⁶—which is the main thrust of Van Til’s method.⁷ After reading *Classical Apologetics*, I can appreciate John Frame’s remark about Van Til’s critics: “Frankly, the debunkers always seem to miss the obvious.”⁸

Starting Point and Circular Reasoning

Where should a defense of the faith begin? “In the case of apologetics,” answer these Classicists, “we consider it self-evident that it must start with the person who is making the intellectual journey” (212). Each apologist must begin with his mind utilizing such tools as the law of non-contradiction, the validity of the law of causality, and the basic reliability of sense perception, applying these to his experiences (72, 215). He must reason in this linear fashion until he arrives at a theistic conclusion. This is supposed to be an obvious refutation of Van Til who teaches that we must start with God. Since God is the very thing we are defending, the authors tell us, we cannot begin with Him. To do so commits the fallacy of circular reasoning (ch. 20).

The authors, however, have confused metaphysical and epistemological starting points.⁹ Metaphysically, man must start his thinking with his own mind, for he cannot think with any other mind but that of his own. Epistemologically, though, man must begin with God, lest his thinking become futile. Van Til put it this way: the unbeliever “refuses to recognize that God is the *ultimate* while he himself should be nothing but the *immediate* starting point in the knowledge situation.”¹⁰

As knowledge depends on God’s self-revelation, we must (epistemologically) begin there, making circular reasoning necessary. When arguing over ultimate commitments, as is the nature of apologetics, our ultimate authority must attest to itself. For if authority A is claimed to be the final authority, but authority B is brought forward to justify A, then A really was not the *final* authority. As Van Til has said, “If we must determine the foundations of the authority, we no longer accept authority on authority.”¹¹ Circular justification is unavoidable. Linear argumentation, when dealing with ultimate issues, unhelpfully produces an infinite regression of justifying authorities. In the nature of the case, then, one’s final authority must attempt *self*-justification.

But not all circularly reasoned worldviews are cogent. Take the naturalist/empiricist outlook on life. It tells us that all knowledge is based on sense perception. It must seek to justify itself lest it contradict

⁵ *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 237.

⁶ Greg Bahnsen groups these men among those “not having grasped or appreciated the force of [Van Til’s] transcendental argument for the rational necessity of Christianity” (*Van Til’s Apologetic*, 672).

⁷ Briefly, transcendental reasoning “takes any fact of experience which it wishes to investigate, and tries to determine what the presuppositions of such a fact must be, in order to make it what it is” (Van Til in Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 516; italics in original).

⁸ John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995), 5.

⁹ The authors manifest their confusion when, in a matter of a few pages (212–216), they (a) mistakenly charge Van Til with confusing metaphysical and epistemological starting points, then (b) confuse the two starting points themselves, but (c) deny that they have done so.

¹⁰ *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 100; emphasis mine.

¹¹ *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 95.

itself—that is, if it proved itself by some other means than sense perception, then clearly not *all* knowledge is based on sense perception. It is just as clear, however, that no sense perception can justify the claim that all knowledge is based on sense perception. What observation can vindicate this claim? Consequently, far from being self-justifying, the naturalist/empiricist outlook is self-refuting!

Taking Van Til’s advice (and the Bible’s, Ps. 36:9!), we can know that our senses are basically reliable. Our epistemological authority—God speaking in His Scriptures—everywhere assumes that our senses are reliable. His prohibitions of stealing and of coveting our neighbor’s property, for example, assume that we can discover through our senses what is our property and what is our neighbor’s. Start with God and you can have the reliability of sense perception as well. Start somewhere else and the project of vindicating the reliability of sense perception is ruined, as these authors are honest enough to admit:

How can we be sure that our senses are even basically reliable and not totally distortive? We cannot. That is why we are left with the common sense necessity of assuming it. (87)

Departing from Van Til’s circle forces these rationalists into fideism. No, with Van Til “we prefer to reason in a circle to not reasoning at all.”¹²

Apologetic Primacy

The authors hold to the primacy of the intellect. “Primacy of intellect means that we must think about God before we can actually know Him” (227). But the Biblical witness does not always present our intellect as grasping the truth first. There is the *descriptive* primacy of the will (John 7:17), the emotions (Prov. 1:7), and one’s behavior (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 5:8–10; Heb. 5:14). At times, these other means lead our intellect to the truth. *Prescriptively*, God wills the primacy of His Word rather than elevating any one faculty above others. We must follow the faculty that follows the Word.

Furthermore, the authors’ primacy doctrine denies that man knows God from conception. So when the authors say that “we must think about God *before* we can actually know Him,” they are forgetting about the doctrine of general revelation. Whenever we think about God, we are thinking of a Being we already know.

Noetic Effects of Sin

The authors’ misunderstanding of sin’s influence on the mind allows them their apologetic. When this doctrine is properly understood, the Classical approach cannot be maintained. They write: “We suggest that classic Reformed orthodoxy saw the noetic influence of sin not as direct through a totally depraved mind, but as *indirect* through the totally depraved heart” (243). So they seem to believe that there is a period of time when the mind is not depraved (though they never spell out when the mind *does* become depraved). This is necessary for their system. Since these Christians are, in the words of John Frame, “rationalistic with a vengeance,”¹³ then to believe that the mind is depraved from the womb places a wrench in the entire system.

One can see their grave misjudgment when they ascribe to Van Til the belief that the mind has been “eradicated” (213), “destroyed” (244), or “obliterat[ed]” (245). For them it seems that the only options

¹² *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 518.

¹³ *Analysis*, 407.

available are the soundness of the mind or its nonexistence. However, there is a third possibility: Calvin's position. In his *Institutes* he wrote: "the natural gifts were corrupted in man through sin, but . . . his supernatural gifts were stripped from him."¹⁴ Man's natural abilities (intellect, will, emotion) remain but have become *marred*. They can no longer be used in an ethical fashion, which is to say that man's supernatural gifts are no longer at his disposal. To say that man has a mind that cannot be used to the glory of God no more obliterates the mind than it does the will or emotions when similar statements are made of them. These faculties have survived the Fall, but are now morally unable to find God. *Total* depravity is inherited from birth and includes the mind. Again, as Calvin has taught us:

If the whole man is depicted by these words of Christ, "What is born of flesh, is flesh" . . . , man is very clearly shown to be a miserable creature. . . . Now suppose that in man's nature there is nothing but flesh: extract something good from it if you can. But, you will say, the word "flesh" pertains only to the sensual part of the soul, not to the higher part. This is thoroughly refuted from the words of Christ and of the apostle. The Lord's reasoning is: Man must be reborn [John 3:3], for he "is flesh" [John 3:6]. . . . Whatever we have from nature, therefore, is flesh. . . . You see that he [Paul in Eph. 4:22–23] lodges unlawful and wicked desires not solely in the sensual part of the soul, but even in the mind itself, and for this reason he requires its renewal.¹⁵

Classicists seem unaware of the primacy-of-the-intellect verses total-depravity antinomy involved in their proposal. In order to get their apologetic off the ground they have denied the *totality* of total depravity.

Presuppositional Commitments

They are presuppositionalists, but with regard to the wrong authorities. Their "non-negotiable assumptions" are: The validity of the law of non-contradiction, the validity of the law of causality, and the basic reliability of sense perception (72). The fact that these are given such a status, whereas Scripture *is negotiable*, reveals much about the authors' confusion of commitments. They write: "The Bible is not proven to be the Word of God because it says so and the Spirit is not known to be the Spirit of God because He is said to say so" (139).

These disciples of Calvin have departed far from him. Calvin said "that Scripture indeed is self-authenticated,"¹⁶ and "the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it."¹⁷ It is because Calvin's followers departed from his epistemology (*sola Scriptura*) that the Enlightenment was able to darken the world.

They also blatantly depart from the Puritans: "The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, . . . dependeth . . . wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God."¹⁸ It is in the context of section 4 of the Westminster Confession that section 5 (which deals with other *confirmatory* evidences) must be read.

¹⁴ *Institutes*, 2.2.12.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, 2.3.1.

¹⁶ *Institutes*, 1.7.5.

¹⁷ *Institutes*, 1.7.4.

¹⁸ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.4.

Logic

They overestimate what logic can do. The authors fault Van Til for teaching that unbelievers use the laws of logic to keep down the truth. On the contrary, say these traditionalists, “They have to *violate* them to ‘keep down the truth.’ Reason would not be functioning but malfunctioning if by it the truth were kept down” (213).

This seriously misunderstands the function of the laws of reasoning. Logic does not reveal truth, *per se*, but reveals correct or incorrect reasoning *from the supplied premises*.¹⁹ Given non-theistic premises, *only* non-theistic conclusions are logically possible. If an argument is supplied with non-theistic premises, and yet ends with theistic conclusions, you can be sure the reasoning is fallacious.²⁰ (see below the many fallacies committed in the traditional formulations of the theistic proofs)

Apart from these several areas of confusion, the Classical approach suffers from two major defects: (a) it is an immoral apologetic, and (b) it is a methodologically deficient apologetic.

An Immoral Apologetic

The Classical method wants to prove Christian conclusions without using Christian presuppositions. These apologists contend that to assume the very thing one sets out to prove commits the logical fallacy of circular reasoning (ch. 20). So we must argue for God *autonomously*, that is, independently of theistic assumptions: “We *must* begin with ourselves, that is, autonomously” (231). This they defend as ethically acceptable: “We admit the charge of autonomy, but not its guiltiness. . . . Autonomy is bad only after heteronomy is known, not before. . . . At that point, autonomy is no sin but a necessity and a virtue” (231). Heteronomy, that is, God’s law, is known after conversion: “If [the unbeliever] follows the laws of his own nature, autonomously if you please, he will come to the conclusion that there is a God. That, of course, will be the end of his autonomy” (233).

Autonomy is Sin

The Bible describes sin as “self-law” (autonomy). “There is a way [a “law,” if you will] that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Prov. 14:12). God’s Law defines righteous behavior (Deut. 13:18); indeed, “sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4).

Autonomy was the cause of it all in Eden. Eve set herself up as a law to decide between God’s Word and Satan’s, which behavior Paul warns us not to imitate (2 Cor. 11:3). It is independent thought not founded upon Scripture that this same apostle precisely legislates against when he says to take “*every*

¹⁹ “The logician is not so much interested in the truth or falsehood of propositions as in the logical relations between them . . . Determining the correctness or incorrectness of arguments falls squarely within the province of logic. The logician is interested in the correctness even of arguments whose premisses [*sic*] might be false” (Irving M. Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic*, 8th ed. [New York: Macmillan, 1990], 53).

²⁰ Ironically, in their better moments the authors themselves recognize this truth: “Brilliant and erudite reasoning may produce abhorant [*sic*] conclusions if it proceeds from a faulty starting point. . . . Any reasoning process that begins with the denial of the known and proceeds on the basis of prejudice can hardly produce light, no matter how lucid and cogent the argument may be after the initial error is made. In fact, the more consistent a dishonest thinker is the further away from basic truth his mind will carry him” (52). Sounds like logic can hold down the truth!

thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Classical apologists, it seems, believe that there are some thoughts that may lie outside of obedience to Christ. And Peter instructs us to sanctify Christ as Lord in our hearts when we give to every man a reason for our hope (1 Peter 3:15). By denying Christ’s authority and His Word in our apologetic we do the opposite of this command from Peter. Do we think Peter sanctified Christ as Lord in his heart when he verbally denied Him three times? Scripture is sufficient for ethical living (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Is not defending the faith part of our ethical living?

We do not have a moral right to treat God’s Word as disputable. As Edmund Clowney wrote: “When God speaks, it is the voice of Satan that asks, ‘Hath God said?’ The voice of man made in God’s image must be, ‘Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth!’”²¹ This is to love the Lord our God with all our mind.

All People Know God

These apologists seem to forget that all men know God. Everyone has the *seed of divinity* implanted within them, as God creates all men as His image; and they also know of God from the created order they daily observe (Rom. 1–2). Classical apologists acknowledge such in their anthropology but forget about it altogether when attempting to justify their defense of the faith. “But people [unregenerate men] do not necessarily consider themselves in opposition to God, whose existence they do not even know at the outset” (233). To acknowledge that all men know God, and thus His demand upon them to submit to every word of His, would be the end of a justified autonomy.

Apologetics Advises Believers

It should be pointed out that these authors are advocating an autonomous apologetic for *Christians*—those already convinced of heteronomy. The authors themselves are believers and yet use and teach an autonomous method. The words of Jesus come to mind: “Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19).

A Methodologically Deficient Apologetic

The Classical method involves two steps. Step 1 attempts to prove that *a* God exists via rational arguments. Step 2 attempts to prove that this God is the *Christian* God via a historical argument from miracles.

²¹ “Preaching the Word of the Lord: Cornelius Van Til, V.D.M.,” in Frame, *Analysis*, 429.

*Rational Theistic Arguments*²²

Recall earlier I mentioned that arguments starting with non-theistic premises can only logically end with non-theistic conclusions. Note the many fallacies *Classical Apologetics* commits to conclude with a personal *Theos*.

The ***Ontological Argument***, in which they wish to prove God's existence from the possibility that He exists, is presented as follows: "Once we think of the possibility of God, everything is proven. *To think of being is to know being*. We are conscious of being. However we think, we cannot think anything but being. We are immediately aware of Him" (101). Or to put it in Christian terminology: "If we can think of God at all, we are compelled to think that He is. God is being . . . [and] we cannot conceive of nonbeing" (100).

This argument, though, subtly interchanges "being" with "God." It fallaciously moves from impersonal "being" to a personal "Him." This is easily seen if we substitute 'existence' for 'being':

To think of [existence] is to know [existence]. We are conscious of [existence]. However we think, we cannot think anything but [existence].

The impersonal concept of existence is all that is proved.

Also, as John Frame notes, this "argument proves pantheism,"²³ for our conception of being not only applies to infinite being, but also to finite beings. "Therefore, if 'being' is divine, then finite beings are part of that divine being." In other words, "being" needs further qualifications to distinguish between the being that God has and the being that His creations have. But no qualifications are given, and unless I am missing something, I do not see the other theistic proofs offering any either.

The ***Cosmological Argument*** is presented as follows: "if something exists now, something exists necessarily; if anything is, something must have the power of being within itself" (115). Taking a single molecule as their item that exists now, they suggest there are only four possible explanations for it: the molecule is (a) an illusion, (b) self-created, (c) self-existent, or (d) created ultimately by something self-existent (115).

They dismiss the first three options (116–121): (a) If the molecule is an illusion, we are still forced to ask if this illusion is self-created, self-existent, or created by something self-existent. The illusion, then, would be the item that "exists now." (b) To postulate a self-created molecule violates the law of causality (the molecule would be an effect without a cause) and the law of non-contradiction (giving to the molecule the power to create before it even exists). (c) To make anything in the world self-existent would qualify it as an object of worship, possessing as it does the divine attribute of self-existence. And even if we made each molecule dependent on prior causes, wherein we had an infinite regressive chain of finite causes, this still would not work since "nowhere is there to be found the power of being within the causal chain." If nothing within the chain is self-existent then neither can the whole chain be self-existent.

We are thus left with option (d): "our molecule is created by something that is self-existent, eternal, and transcendent, which we call God" (121). He is the uncaused Cause and all other things are caused by Him.

²² The book presents awkward formulations of the traditional theistic arguments, perhaps trying to avoid the traditional criticisms. In so doing, however, they make the arguments hard to follow. I doubt the average person would be persuaded by these formulations as they are often persuaded by the traditional formulations.

²³ *Analysis*, 419.

However, major problems confront this argument. First, it contains arbitrariness. The writers admit that causation is only true by definition: “[Causality’s] definition is tautological: every effect must have a cause. The term *effect* carries within itself the notion of cause” (83). Analytic truths, however, do not necessarily speak of existing things. If I say “A husband is a married man,” I have said something analytically true, but this does not prove that there are any husbands in the world. The authors recognize this: “The tautological definition has analytical import but no necessary existential import unless or until we first establish that there are effects” (111). So the burden of this argument then becomes proving that the world is an effect, thus requiring a cause. But I do not see in their book that this is proved. They apparently allow uncaused things in their worldview: “we say not that everything has an antecedent cause but that every *effect* has an antecedent cause” (111). Causation is defined this way to avoid the logical conclusion that even God requires a cause. But since the authors arbitrarily end their reasoning with God, why cannot naturalists arbitrarily end their reasoning with the natural world (since “not . . . everything has an antecedent cause”)? This argument never closes the door on an eternal, uncaused world.

Second, this argument commits logical fallacies. It is asserted by them that a series of causes must end somewhere. But why can there not be an infinite series of *natural* causes? The authors attempt to rebut this objection by saying “nowhere is there to be found the power of being within the causal chain” (120). In other words, since there is no self-existence *within* the series of causes then there can be no self-existence for the *entire series* itself. But this rebuttal comes at the expense of two logical fallacies: (a) As the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant pointed out, it commits the fallacy of equivocation—reasoning from characteristics about the *natural* world to characteristics about a *supra*-natural world. Conclusions about anything other than the natural world surpass the bounds of the premise. (b) It commits the fallacy of composition—assuming what is true of the parts is true of the whole. It does not necessarily follow that if each part of an automobile is light in weight then the whole automobile is light in weight. Neither does it necessarily follow that if each entity within the world is contingent then the whole world must be contingent as well.

Third, this argument rests on several unproved assumptions. It assumes that our senses are basically reliable: “How can we be sure that our senses are even basically reliable and not totally distortive? We cannot. That is why we are left with the common sense necessity of assuming it” (87). What an admission! Without proving the basic reliability of our senses, however, they cannot get their argument started, that “something exists now.”

It also assumes the universality of causation. Since these apologists will not presuppose the all-controlling God of Scripture who reveals to us His mind, then there is no rational basis for believing in universals, including the universality of causation. At best, they can say that all of the events of their own experience have proven to be caused. But there is no rational basis for projecting their experiences onto unexperienced domains. This is the rigorous challenge to causation that the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume has posed. *Classical Apologetics* never responds to this criticism of Hume. And without the usage of universals, we cannot assert *laws* (universal generalizations from our particular experiences); but these apologists do just that: “The law remains intact, *ex nihilo nihil fit*: out of nothing, nothing comes” (121). They thus leave another door open: the world may have created itself! In a word, their rationality is based on the *irrational* concept of causation (i.e., irrational outside of the philosophical framework of Christianity).

The *Teleological Argument* is presented as follows: Since the universe is filled with purposive creatures, “Could purposive creatures be from a being without purpose? . . . Could the source of all beings

purposelessly populate the cosmos with purpose-seekers?” (123–124). Surely creatures do not have abilities that their Creator does not have. Therefore, purposive beings prove a purposive Creator.

Yet, as with the cosmological argument, this argument wants to move from nature to a realm beyond nature. Although they ignored this criticism of Kant for the former argument, they address it here:

If you have behind a finite, teleological event, a finite, teleological cause, then the question immediately becomes, What is the cause of that finite, purposive cause? And so *ad infinitum*. To put it another way, the finite, greater cause would be no ultimate explanation of the finite, lesser event. It would be only an approximate explanation, itself calling for an ultimate explanation. (130)

They conclude: “the only place where one can get an ultimate resting point on which to account for finite, teleological effects would be in an infinite, teleological cause” (130). But since the realm beyond nature exceeds our experience, we can never know what an entity there is like. So, first, this argument equivocates on its premises.

Second, another criticism by Kant is that this argument only establishes a purposer ordering an already existing material world, not a Creator of the material world.

Third, Kant shows that the being often concluded with does not follow from the premises. These apologists write: “For one solitary, purposeful event in the entire universe would necessitate nothing less than the eternally, self-existent, omniscient, omnipotent, designing deity we call God” (133). But Kant wonders how one can conclude with omnipotence from the great power we experience in the world, or with omniscience from the great wisdom we experience.

Fourth, it fallaciously reasons from many purposive beings in our experience to only one purposer. The argument equally justifies polytheism as much as monotheism.

Fifth, Hume would ask why the authors restrict their argument to purpose. Purposive creatures are not the only thing that we experience in this world. We also experience evil, imperfection, and incompetency. If we are going to reason consistently by analogy from what we experience, we must conclude that the purposer of the world is evil, imperfect, and incompetent—hardly the Christian God.

The authors’ own evaluation of these arguments is much too gratuitous: “At their classical best, the theistic proofs are not merely probable but demonstrative [i.e., certain]” (101). Quite the contrary, after considering these ‘proofs,’ at best they have demonstrated that existence exists (ontological), that natural causes exist in this world (cosmological), and that eternal matter has been ordered by a natural designer (teleological). These arguments fall far short of the kind of God they set out prove.

Historical Argument from Miracles

From the existence of a general God they move on to “the essential case for Christianity” (156), an argument from miracles. Here is the argument:

- (1) It is virtually granted that the Bible (not assumed to be inspired) contains generally reliable history.
- (2) The Bible records miracles as part of its generally reliable history.
- (3) These miracles authenticate the Bible’s messengers and their message.
- (4) Therefore, the Bible message ought to be received as divine.
- (5) The Bible message includes the doctrine of its own inspiration.
- (6) Therefore, the Bible is more than a generally reliable record. It is a divinely inspired record. (141)

So how fares this Christian presupposition-*less* argument?

Premise #1: The authors do not even argue for this premise; they simply refer readers to other books (142). I assume that they think this point needs argumentation since they acknowledge that there are some who do not consider the Bible's history reliable (142–143). The fact of the matter is there exist many Bible scholars who challenge every conservative Christian claim about the Bible—the early dating of the Gospels, their authorship, accurate manuscripts, historical and scientific accuracy, etc. Many even doubt the historical Jesus ever existed. Universities around the world stock their faculties with such professors (watch any cable documentary on the Bible).

Moreover, the apostles would have written as old men (several decades after the recorded events). How can we be sure their minds were sound or that they had no memory lapses as they wrote? Or how can we be sure that they did not embellish the life of their teacher? This often happens with disciples' writings. Why should we consider Jesus' disciples any different?

Nor can we conclude that the *whole* Bible is historically accurate from *some* of its contents being historically accurate. Because Luke, for instance, got it right that there were two acting high priests in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar (Luke 3:1–2) does not mean Luke got it right when he writes that Jesus rose from the dead. What independent source verifies this?

Premise #2: The not-assumed-to-be-inspired-Bible does not give us miracles but *reports* of unusual events. But until premise #1 is verified (that the Bible presents accurate history) we cannot know if these reported unusual events ever happened—maybe Jesus never walked on water.

Even granting premise #1, why should we consider the Bible's reported unusual events as genuine miracles just because these reports appear in a historically reliable book? These apologists go on to define a true miracle instead of answering this kind of pertinent question. It is just because the Bible reports such things as the raising of dead corpses, walking on water, calming storms, and restoring cut off ears and sight to the blind (simply by placing mud on the eyes!) that makes the book's reliability suspect. Is it not more probable that the Bible authors were deranged, or purposely deceptive, or exaggerated, or mistaken in their observations than for these extravagant events to have happened? As David Hume has so brilliantly and famously taught us, probability always works against (autonomous) arguments from miracles:

When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.²⁴

Interestingly, the authors accuse Hume of begging the question, saying he assumes that God does not cause *all* events (151). If God causes all events, they reason, there is no probabilistic objection to miraculous claims. But how do they know that God causes every event? What in nature teaches them that? Are they not relying on the Bible, the very book in question, to answer Hume? Who is really doing the question-begging here?

Premise #3: This premise also relies upon premise #1. As premise #1 is yet unproved, so is premise #3. But even granting that the Bible is historically accurate, without establishing premise #2 (that the reported

²⁴ *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, vol. 35 of *Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), Section X, Part I, 491.

miracles were genuine) then premise #3 does not follow. Miracles may authenticate a message, but not mere reports of unusual events.

But even granting that the reported unusual events really happened, premise #3 still would not follow:

Even if we grant that some very unusual events took place in the ministry of Jesus, how can we be sure that these can be explained *only* as a divine attestation to Jesus' authority? It is extremely difficult to prove (apart from Christian presuppositions) the negative proposition that no other cause could have produced these events. The authors need to prove this proposition in order to make their case, but nothing in the book amounts to such a proof.²⁵

The ancients believed that lightning and thunder were the result of ill-tempered gods; we now know that natural causes are behind them. Similarly, the unusual events in the Bible may be explained by natural causes yet unknown to us.

Premises #4 – #6: Even granting these premises, they would not prove that the biblical divine message is true. Not all conceptions of deity always tell the truth—take the Islamic and ancient Greek conceptions of god, for example.²⁶ Until we know that the god who is performing these miracles has an honest nature, we cannot know how much of the message being authenticated is true. Consequently, the conclusion of this argument is a long way from Christianity.

Conclusion

The authors begin their book lamenting Christianity's retreat from a rational defense of the faith. Yet they wish to return to rational apologetics without adequately dealing with Kant and Hume—the reason for the retreat! Instead, *Classical Apologetics* wants to battle the Enlightenment by adopting the autonomous presuppositions of the Enlightenment. But Van Til asks the obvious question:

How shall a Protestant really challenge the wisdom of the world in the way that the Apostle Paul requires him to do, if he self-consciously retains some measure of this very wisdom of the world in his own system of thought?²⁷

If we answer a fool according to his folly we will end up like him (Prov. 26:4). In the end, therefore, this unfaithful apologetic does not accomplish much more than fideism. To bring Christians off the reservation we need stronger weapons than this book supplies.

Van Til was able to supply these strong weapons because he succumbed to the truths that it is the biblical God “who teaches man knowledge” (Ps. 94:10) and that departures from this God only gives pseudo-knowledge (1 Tim. 6:20). He could therefore write:

The only “proof” of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of “proving” anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of “proof” itself.²⁸

²⁵ Frame, *Analysis*, 420–421.

²⁶ Interestingly, even the biblical God is not beyond deception (1 Kings 22:19–23; 2 Thess. 2:11).

²⁷ *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1980), 13.

²⁸ *Van Til's Apologetic*, 730.

Unleashing the potency of the Bible has been Van Til's legacy. His *sola Scriptura* theory of knowledge will drive the Enlightenment's children back into the closet and help establish the Great Commission. With this we can see the truth of Frame's claim: "Van Til is perhaps the most important Christian thinker since Calvin."²⁹ May God open more eyes to see the same.

²⁹ *Analysis*, 44.