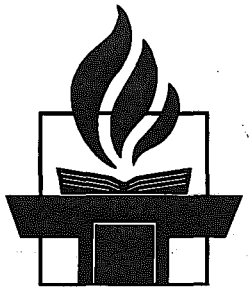
Reformation & Revival



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But for all his repeated mention of the Kingdom of God, Jesus never once paused to define it. Nor did any hearer ever interrupt him to ask "Master, what do these words, 'Kingdom of God,' which you use so often, mean?" On the contrary Jesus used the term as if assured it would be understood, and indeed it was. The Kingdom of God lay within the vocabulary of every Jew. It was something they understood and longed for desperately.

John Bright

All Christians, especially those who handle the word of God and attempt to teach others, should take heed and learn Moses aright. Thus where he gives commandment, we are not to follow him except as he agrees with the natural law. Moses is a teacher and doctor of the Jews. We have our own master, Christ, and he has set before us what we are to know, observe, do and leave undone.

Martin Luther

A Review Article

Gregg Strawbridge

Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith

Greg L. Bahnsen, ed. Robert R. Booth
Atlanta: American Vision (1996).
289 pages, cloth, $14.95.

In my theological mansion are many rooms. Some have been sealed off: "Enter Not," like the basement room marked, "Higher Criticism." On the ground floor there is a beautiful library with plush Victorian furniture and mahogany bookcases. First edition (of course) copies of Calvin, Luther, Owen, Edwards, and Spurgeon are bookmarked on the table. In one wing of this illustrious mansion there is a long hall with tomes in Latin and Greek lining the walls. Raphael's fresco, "The School of Athens" (the original, you know, not a reprint) with Plato pointing up and Aristotle, with fingers spread, pointing down overlooks leather-bound volumes of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. At the end of the hall there are two adjacent rooms marked "Evidentialism" and "Presuppositionalism," respectively. Here, I often find myself standing in the hall between the two rooms, looking at the central portraits of B. B. Warfield in the former and Abraham Kuyper in the latter. Recently, I have had occasion to add a new book to the *Cornelius Van Til Memorial Bookcase* in my Presuppositional Study, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith,* by Greg L. Bahnsen, edited by Robert R. Booth.

If you are filling the bookshelves of these two rooms in your library, this book is a worthy addition. Practically aimed at equipping believers to do apologetics, Bahnsen's book is a very readable handbook grounded on Van Til's presuppositional apologetics.[1] Trained in philosophy as an undergraduate, Bahnsen earned M.Div. and Th.M. degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary under Van Til, and

completed a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Southern California. As an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church he served as pastor, teacher, and apologist, vigorously defending the faith in public debates with such atheists as Gordon Stein and Edward Tabash. Due to a congenital heart defect Bahnsen struggled with heart problems and died after surgery on December 11, 1995, at the age of 47.

Bahnsen's exposition of Van Til's apologetic methodology is philosophically rigorous, theologically grounded, and biblically intense. The clarion call is 1 Corinthians 1:20: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world!" (p. 55). *Always Ready* equips believers in demonstrating the foolishness of non-Christian thought. This is done in five major sections comprised of five or six pithy chapters and a succinct summary of each section. The major sections strike at the preparation of the apologist, as well as the issues encountered by apologists: (1) "The Lordship of Christ in the Realm of Knowledge," (2) "The Conditions Necessary for the Apologetic Task," (3) "How to Defend the Faith," (4) "The Conditions Necessary for Apologetic Success," and (5) "Answers to Apologetic Challenges." The book concludes with an appendix, "Biblical Exposition of Acts 17: The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens," a carefully documented exposition. There are also Scripture and subject indices.

The atmosphere of the first four sections of the book is scriptural–by which I mean that for an apologetics book, it is surprisingly laden with Scripture citations and references. Bahnsen labors to show that his apologetic not only presupposes the Word as the only sure foundation of knowledge, but that it specifically flows from a mastery of that Word. Ten or more verses referenced per page is not uncommon. Perhaps Bahnsen stands in contrast to Van Til after all (in his writing style). The atmosphere of Van Til's

work is thick with the lofty terms of continental philosophy often spun into homely illustrations. "Rationalism and irrationalism will be taking in each other's washing for a living. There will be a chain of being lying around somewhere, probably right next to the infinitely long cord that the beads with no holes are supposed to decorate."[2] Then there's the man made of water climbing a ladder of water out of the ocean, not to mention the black cat in the coal mine at midnight. For all the difference in style, Bahnsen shows his fidelity to his mentor, as lucid citations of Van Til show up every few pages. The final section, (5) "Answers to Apologetic Challenges," is a good example of presuppositionalism's forte—deconstructing the intellectual opponents of biblical Christianity. Even R.C. Sproul (not a presuppositionalist) has lauded Van Til as producing the most formidable demolition team the world has ever seen.[3] Every college freshman (or Ph.D. candidate, for that matter) would do well to know Bahnsen's analytically precise work on the problems of evil, knowing the supernatural, faith, religious language, and miracles which bring the book to a close. One or two of these thornbushes is sure to be growing in virtually every liberal arts course, but especially in religious, theological, or philosophical studies.

Practically, Bahnsen exhorts Christians to defend the faith with hearts toward God and "heads on straight." In our hearts humility must reign, acknowledging that what we have, we have by grace alone. In our heads, two primary steps, illustrated in Proverbs 26:4-5, serve all apologetic occasions: (1) "Answer a fool as his folly deserves," and show the unbeliever that his own principles, far from being sufficient as a worldview, are "destructive of all knowledge" (p. 57). But then, (2) the apologist must "not answer a fool according to his folly," and thus show the unbeliever that only by embracing the truth of God can preconditions of any knowledge whatsoever be gained.

Aside from demolishing the David Humes, Bertrand Russells, and Antony Flews of the world, those conversant in the issues will note Bahnsen's concern to defend presuppositionalism in the intramural debate with evidentialism or classical apologetics. At this point, perhaps a little review of some of the larger issues in apologetics may be helpful. In my Evidentialist Study, I find apologists arguing cosmologically (from creation to a Creator), teleologically (from order to an Orderer), ontologically (from the concept of God's existence to its reality), and historically (with predictive prophecy, miracles, and preeminently by the resurrection of Christ).[4] On the other hand, presuppositionalists generally reject the validity and effectiveness of these arguments. Presuppositionalists, though they have common enemies, come in several garden varieties. Noted philosopher Gordon Clark's variety is *deductive.* The Bible is to be posited (like an axiom in geometry) and from it other truths may be deduced. According to Clark, then, *only* the Bible and what it logically (propositionally) entails is truth. Every non-Christian system is false because it is internally contradictory. Francis Schaeffer's variety focused on the personal inadequacy of every non-Christian worldview. Christianity is the best basis for personal dignity, meaning, and value. Then, there is the "New Reformed" approach of professional philosophers, Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Ronald Nash, and others. Though not purely presuppositional, this label is often given because of the contrast with evidentialism's need to offer proof that God exists and Christ is the Son of God. Plantinga and company focus on demonstrating the invalidity of atheistic/agnostic critical attacks on Christianity and the rationality of faith *without* evidential proof.[5]

The variety of presuppositionalism that Van Til and followers champion is often misunderstood as either a fideism (literally, "faithism"), an irrational leap of religious

commitment, or as a kind of Reformed deductivism (as in Clark) which begins with an unfounded commitment to the Bible. Actually, Van Til's variety should be distinguished as "transcendental presuppositionalism." One might consider it in contrast to the evidentialist/classical apologetics approach which is very *inductive*, showing by rational proofs that God exists, by historical, archeological, and textual arguments that the New Testament is reliable, then from a historical-legal approach that Christ was raised. On the other hand, Van Til's approach is not purely *deductive,* dogmatically beginning from Scripture and simply positing the truth of God's Word (like Clark above). Rather, Van Til's apologetic is *transcendental.*[6] It argues that the God of Scripture and His truth are the very *preconditions of intelligibility.* It accepts deductive and inductive reasoning, but precedes both. It argues that the very principles of reason, science, and morality are only accounted for in Christianity. Since logic (deduction), science (e.g., induction), the regularity and order of the universe, ethics, personality, etc., can be justified only in the Christian worldview, any statement of an anti-Christian worldview actually presupposes Christianity. (Of course, non-Christians don't admit this.) The truth of God's Word is not *reasoned to* (evidentialism) or *arbitrarily assumed* (deductivism), rather it is transcendentally presupposed as the only basis for knowledge whatsoever. Van Til says,

> Christian theism's fundamental contention is just this, that nothing whatsoever can be known unless God can be and is known. . . . The best, the only, the absolutely certain proof of the truth of Christianity is that unless its truth be presupposed there is no proof of anything. Christianity is proved as being the very foundation of the idea of proof itself (pp. 60-61).

Though, not "axe-grinding" in his manner, Bahnsen cites three key arguments against his apologetics and counters them: (1) that it is dogmatic and rationally unfounded, (2) that it doesn't account for the unbeliever's knowledge, (3) that it prevents any meaningful discussion with the unbeliever (p. 31). Responses to these three objections unfold over several chapters. Briefly, (1) our faith *is* "dogmatic" in the sense that it is based on the revelation of God and absolutely authoritative. Fidelity to the explicit teaching of the Bible requires the apologist, in humility, to call the unbeliever in full repentance to embrace the absolute authority of God's Word (Acts 17:30) (p. 34). However, since the Word of God alone accounts for the very preconditions of knowledge, this authoritative commitment is rationally warranted. (2) The unbeliever has knowledge precisely because he is inconsistent with his espoused principles and because natural revelation is inescapable (cf. Rom. 1:18-20, Ps. 19:1-4) (p. 38). (3) Meaningful discussion with the unbeliever is not prevented because there is "common ground which is not neutral ground" (p. 41). "Every area of life and every fact are what they are because of God's sovereign decree, and so there is no place a man can flee in order to escape the influence, control, and requirements of God" (p. 43). Hence, there is no *neutral ground.* Yet, there is *common ground.* "The whole world, the created realm and public history, constitute commonality between the Christian and the non-Christian" (p. 45).

In my appraisal, I note first that it is refreshing to reflect on such a good representative of Van Til, who in practice and principle urged the necessity of apologetics with the highest level of intellectual expertise. Though Bahnsen says elsewhere, "Van Til believes in proving the existence of God,"[7] presuppositionalism is often represented as irrational, deductivistic, and fideistic (by Van Tilians!). Well-known representatives of presuppositionalism assert without qualification that attempting to prove Christianity is "blasphemous." Still others write that a presuppositionalist "does not try to 'prove' that God exists or that the Bible is true. . . . He does not try to convince the unconverted that the gospel is true."[8] On the lay level presuppositionalism is often "going to the Bible," as opposed to "reasoning" or "arguing" with an unbeliever (as does the evidentialist). It is difficult to separate these representations from saying that presuppositionalism *is not apologetics at all.* Whatever a purely biblical apologetics entails, I am certain that it requires "contending earnestly for the faith" (Jude 3), "making a defense" (1Peter 3:15), "reasoning (literally, "dialoguing") and persuading" (Acts 19:8; 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:9).

Second, two features of Bahnsen's apologetics stand out: (1) the rejection of neutrality in knowledge claims (pp. 3ff.) and (2) the transcendental argument for Christianity (pp. 67ff.). I have no trouble affirming these with the following qualifications and emphases. (1) On the rejection of neutrality, the key is that this is true only *in principle. In actuality* there is a whole world of commonality. What the unbeliever knows, he knows in spite of his consciously stated worldview. Bahnsen seems to appreciate this point, though it is often blurred in the rhetoric of the debate between the two camps of apologetics. What Bahnsen does not seem to recognize is that this makes the classical apologists' theistic proofs in their best form, as well as the evidentialist types of historical-legal arguments for the resurrection, at least *possible.* When a non-Christian rejects *in principle* the argument that there is a powerful, wise, and personal God as evidenced by creation (a cosmological kind of argument based on cause/effect), his reasoning is inconsistent with Christianity (Jer. 10:3ff.; Acts 17:29). At this point they are inconsistent with *what* they know to be true (Rom. 1:19-20) and *how* they know it to be true (i.e., the principle of causation). Similar reasoning must be employed in science and

almost every facet of human knowledge and experience. Likewise, rejecting the legal-historical principles which evidentialists are fond of in proving the resurrection leaves one with *no history at all.* Again, the Bible appeals to eyewitness testimony and historical veracity (Luke 1:2; 2 Peter 1:16; 1 Cor. 15:8). It is unfortunate that presuppositionalists often find it necessary to bolster skepticism in order to buttress presupposing Christianity. But, skepticism only follows from a non-Christian worldview—not from the classical and evidential apologist's appeals to the *actual* common ground between Christians and non-Christians! Bahnsen, for example, appeals to the skepticism of Hume and the relativism of Wittgenstein to show that the classical and evidential arguments fail, or more typically are "naive," only to later annihilate skepticism and relativism by an internal critique.[9] If all non-Christian forms of thought turn out to be basically self-refuting, or at least destructive of knowledge, why should they be appealed to as the *tour de force* against the classical and evidential proofs?

On (2) the transcendental argument for the truth of Christianity (that Christianity alone is the precondition of truth), this is a powerful strategy of defense and Bahnsen's articulation is masterful. Unfortunately, it is difficult for many atheist debaters to grasp.[10] The hesitation I have with the transcendental proof is not with employing it, but with *exclusively employing it.* The value of this presuppositional strategy is sharply overstated when Bahnsen says, "Apologists are prohibited from using a non-presuppositional method in defending the faith . . ." (p. 101). Van Til says, "But this God cannot be proved to exist by any other method than the indirect one of presupposition."[11] Exactly how the transcendental proof is *mutually exclusive* of all others has yet to be demonstrated. I think, rather, it is *mutually supportive* of the traditional proofs in their best formulations. As the *Westminster Confession* says, "The light of

nature showeth that there is a God"—and we may add (transcendentally), if one rejects God and His Word, the very basis for knowing anything else has been rejected (*WCF* 21:1, see also 1:1 and *Larger Catechism* Q. 2).

In conclusion, *Always Ready* deserves a place in your apologetics study: as a general handbook, sensible; as a treatment of certain issues (especially chapter 30 on the "problem of evil"), laudable; as an exposition of presuppositionalism, accessible. Nevertheless, in my critique, Bahnsen is right in what he affirms and wrong in what he denies. He affirms the utter contrast, *in principle,* of the Christian worldview with all others, insisting that the truth of God alone is the very basis for any thought. He denies the validity of arguing by theistic proofs and historical-legal methods that God exists, Christ is the resurrected Son of God, and that the Bible is the Word of God. I remain unconvinced that I cannot have my cake and eat it too!

Author

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Endnotes

1 For the most comprehensive analysis of Van Til in print to date see Westminster Professor John Frame's *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995). However, Bahnsen's book of the same nature is scheduled for publication with P & R in late 1997.

2 Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace* (Tyler, Texas: ICE, 1987), see pp. 10-12. This book is a critique of Van Til's position on common grace. Other information

about Van Til's classroom style can be found in Frame's treatment.

3 This is stated in the famous debate of Sproul and Bahnsen at Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson), "Apologetical Methodology: Classical Apologetics vs. Presuppositionalism," available from the Reformed Book and Tape Library, Mount Olive, Mississippi (Phone: [606] 797-3011) or Covenant Media Foundation.

4 Contemporary evidentialists or classical apologists include Norman Geisler, R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, John Warwick Montgomery, J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, Gary Habermas, and popular Josh McDowell. There are distinctions in emphases here too, but all would see a place for the traditional God-proofs (cosmological, teleological, ontological) and crown their defense with the resurrection argument.

5 See, for example, Plantinga and Wolterstorff (Eds.), *Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983) or Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan , 1988).

6 Van Til admits to borrowing from philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) methodology. See Bahnsen's series, "The Transcendental Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til" (Nashville, Tennessee: Covenant Media Foundation) Phone: [800] 553-3938.

7 Tape one in Bahnsen's *A Short Synopsis of Van Til* (Covenant Tape Ministry). This series is brief, but one of the best expositions of Van Til's apologetics.

8 See, for example, the *Chalcedon Report* (Valecito, California).

9 For example see the critique by J. W. Montgomery or R. C. Sproul in "The Transcendental Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til" series.

10 This was the case in both the Bahnsen-Stein Debate and the Bahnsen-Tabish Debate. Perhaps founding an

Association for Better Atheist Debaters (A-BAD) is in order.

11 *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967). See the full context in pp. 108-109.