



Presuppositional Apologetics and the Theology of the Cross

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From the standpoint of the theology of the cross, apologetics can find no abiding home in Lutheran theology. After all, classical apologetics runs counter to Lutheran soteriology and epistemology. In regard to soteriology, we are saved by God's action, not our own. Thus, it is impossible for us to work or to reason our way toward God.¹ We simply cannot rise from creation to God but must be grasped by the Spirit working through the word. And if we can't reason our own way to God, how can we reason someone else to God apologetically?

In regard to epistemology, the primary source of our theological knowledge is the cross of Jesus Christ, not the created order.² Although creation does witness to a law-giving creator, it provides no insight into the gracious character of God.³ Consequently, we cannot know God fully or truly through a natural theology. And if this is true, it naturally follows that we cannot use natural theology as an apologetic for a gracious God.

¹ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 69–70.

² Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, 72–73, 77–80.

³ Lennart Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther's Theology*, trans. Walther J. Kukkonen (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 1–3, 6–7.

Christians are enjoined to “proclaim the faith that is in them,” but there are theological hazards in the way Christian apologetics have traditionally been done. This article considers an alternative means of proclaiming the gospel in keeping with Lutheran theology.

For both of these reasons, Lutheran theology militates against the method of classical apologetics, which seeks to reason upward from creation to God. For just this reason, however, Lutheran theology is compatible with presuppositional apologetics because this latter approach follows the inverse method of reasoning outward from special revelation to the created order.⁴

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As its name implies, presuppositional apologetics is concerned with the assumptions that Christians and non-Christians bring to an apologetic encounter. After all, it is precisely these presuppositions that define the respective positions of the two sides. In this regard, the goal of presuppositional apologetics is to argue for Christianity by bringing out the implications of these differing assumptions. In particular, the apologist seeks to show that Christian presuppositions account for the breadth of human experience while unbelieving presuppositions destroy such experience. Arguing in this fashion, the Christian begins with biblical revelation and reasons outward to creation. Such a method is compatible with the derivative use of reason allowed by Martin Luther. Although he denied that reason was a *source* of theological knowledge, Luther believed that reason was a valid *method* for drawing out the implications of biblical revelation.⁵

Given its revelational grounding, presuppositional apologetics provides a method that is consistent with Lutheran theology. Thus, Lutherans do not have to choose between fidelity to their basic theology and cogent apologetic reasoning. To make this tool accessible, I will discuss the rudiments of presuppositional apologetics below. First, I will present the method itself. Second, I will provide the theological basis of the method. Third, I will examine the apologetic point of contact between the Christian and her non-Christian friend. Finally, I will consider the concrete application of the method to provide a sense for how it is used in practice.

THE METHOD OF PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

As mentioned above, presuppositional apologetics focuses upon the faith commitments that both parties bring to an apologetic encounter. In such an encounter, fundamental presuppositions define competing paradigms, which color all the facts in debate. In this regard, the situation is analogous to the competing scientific paradigms of Copernicus and Ptolemy. Copernicus held that the

⁴ Presuppositional apologetics was developed in the 1920s by the Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til., *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1967).

⁵ Walther von Loewenich, *Luther's Theology of the Cross*, trans. Herbert J. A. Bouman (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 72–74.

planets revolve around the sun whereas Ptolemy held that they revolve around the earth. As a result, the two systems not only had different frameworks but also different facts. For Copernicus all the facts were sun-centered facts, but for Ptolemy they were earth-centered facts.

In a similar way, when a Christian confronts a non-Christian, the faith commitments together with the facts they color are both in question. For the Christian all facts are God-centered facts whereas for the non-Christian they aren't. Thus, neither side can appeal to "neutral" or "objective" facts in making its case. Rather, one must concentrate upon the presuppositions that color the facts and make them appear as they do. Consequently, both the Christian and the non-Christian have to enter each others' systems to see how the world appears from each presupposed framework. Only then is it possible to assess the impact of these faith commitments in accounting for human experience. Cornelius Van Til writes:

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the "facts" and "laws" intelligible. The question is as to what the "facts" and "laws" really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes that they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?

The answer to this question cannot be finally settled by any direct discussion of "facts." It must, in the last analysis, be settled indirectly. The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake, in order to show him that on such a position the "facts" are not facts and the "laws" are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument's sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible.

To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, *circular reasoning*. The starting point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another.⁶

From Van Til's methodological description, we see how presuppositional apologetics works. Its task is twofold. First, the apologist seeks to reduce the non-Christian position to absurdity by showing that its presuppositions cannot adequately account for human experience. Second, having cleared the deck, the apologist then shows that Christian presuppositions do in fact account for human experience. For instance, a philosophical materialist cannot account for such

⁶ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 100–101.

personal phenomena as meaning, purpose, knowledge, love, or good and evil. By contrast, Christianity can account for these phenomena because its presupposition of a triune God grounds a philosophy of cosmic personalism (see below).

One interesting feature in Van Til's description is the notion that all reasoning is ultimately circular. While we strive to avoid circular reasoning in simple arguments, the situation changes when we examine our basic presuppositions. Because these presuppositions color all the facts and even affect our view of reason itself, "the starting point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another." In our analogy above, we saw how the presuppositions of Copernicus and Ptolemy colored the facts. But in their case, they at least had reason in common. However, when we move to the level of our most basic assumptions, we deal with presupposed frameworks that color all of reality. Hence even our conception of reason and method are affected. This means that at the highest levels, all reasoning is circular.

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THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS OF PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

Having considered the method of presuppositional apologetics, I want to examine its theological basis. Key to this method is showing that Christian presuppositions account for the totality of human experience. But what exactly are these Christian presuppositions? In the most general sense, these presuppositions are biblical revelation itself, especially as expressed in doctrinal form. But in a more focused sense, our basic presupposition is the triune God speaking in Scripture.⁷

⁷ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 179.

That being the case, let's examine how the triune God establishes a philosophy of cosmic personalism within which human experience becomes possible.

To make this case, I will consider three interrelated aspects of Van Til's theology. First, God's triune nature establishes him as an absolute person who is capable of creating and sustaining the universe, thereby establishing a basis for cosmic personalism.⁸ Second, the Trinity is the common source of both the unity and the diversity of the created order since God is both one and three. Finally, the Trinity establishes an exhaustively personal context for human experience through the medium of the Holy Spirit, who envelops and permeates God's creation.

THE TRIUNE CREATOR AS AN ABSOLUTE PERSON

According to Van Til, God's triune nature establishes his absolute personality and thus his capacity to create the universe. In this regard, the central issue is the problem of correlativity. If the Infinite is limited by the finite, the two become correlative and thus interdependent. This problem was previously recognized by Hegel. For Hegel, such correlativity produces a bad Infinity because the limitation and interdependence of the Infinite renders it finite. Hegel's solution to this problem was for the Infinite to incorporate the finite into itself.

Unlike Hegel, Van Til solved the problem of correlativity in a classically Trinitarian way. Van Til's approach was to say that the Trinitarian persons are *internally* correlative to each other apart from creation and thus not *externally* correlative with the world. As a triune community of persons, God has personal relation and hence personal opposition within his own being. He is therefore exhaustively correlative within himself "prior to" and apart from creation.

Accordingly, he does not compromise his *aseity* or his personality by defining himself correlative to a finite, impersonal world.⁹ In other words, it is due to God's personal relationality that he is in no way dependent upon creation since his internal correlativity eliminates the need for external correlativity. God is therefore absolute (not externally correlative) because he is personal (internally and personally correlative) and personal because he is absolute. So understood, the internal correlativity of God's triune personality undergirds his *aseity* and therewith his transcendence over the created order. Let's see how Van Til makes this case:

We may express this thought philosophically by saying that for us the eternal one and many form a self-complete unity. God is absolute personality and therefore absolute individuality. He exists necessarily. He

⁸ As an evangelical Christian, I use traditional language for God as warranted by Scripture and the catholic tradition.

⁹ God's *aseity* is his self-dependence. To say that God is *a se* is literally to say that he is "of (*a*) himself (*se*)." Thus, God's *aseity* is literally his "of-himself-ness." In other words, God is self-caused. He is the ground of his own existence and is internally self-defined. Stated differently, he is "self-contained" since he is not dependent upon anything outside himself.

has no non-being over against himself in comparison with which he defines himself; he is internally self-defined.

Using the language of the One-and-Many question we contend that in God the one and the many are equally ultimate. Unity in God is no more fundamental than diversity, and diversity in God is no more fundamental than unity. The persons of the Trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another. The Son and the Spirit are ontologically on a par with the Father.¹⁰

Moreover, because personal identity is defined through relationships with other persons, the relationality within God's being also renders him fully personal. Consequently, God is seen to be an absolute person because the very relationality that renders God personal also renders him absolute.

In the above citation, the second paragraph provides the basis for understanding the first. Van Til's point is that unity and diversity are equally fundamental to God's being since he is eternally one and eternally three. For this reason, God can compare and contrast within his own being and so does not need to define himself by comparing and contrasting himself with a finite creation. Accordingly, Van Til says, "He has no non-being over against himself in comparison with which he defines himself; he is internally self-defined." Because God is thus internally self-defined, he is the ground of his own being and therefore absolute. Moreover, because personal identity is defined through relationships with other persons, the relationality within God's being also renders him fully personal. Consequently, God is seen to be an absolute person because the very relationality that renders God personal also renders him absolute. The personal aspect of this relationality emerges more clearly in the following citation:

God exists in himself as a triune self-consciously active being. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are each a personality and together constitute the exhaustively personal God. There is an eternal, internal self-conscious interaction between the three persons of the Godhead. They are co-substantial. Each is as much God as are the other two. The Son and the Spirit do not derive their being from the Father. The diversity and the unity in the Godhead are therefore equally ultimate; they are exhaustively correlative to one another and not correlative to anything else.¹¹

¹⁰ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 25–26.

¹¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980), 8.

As seen above, God's triune nature establishes his absolute personality and therewith his transcendence over the created order. On the basis of his triune nature, therefore, God is *a se* and thus infinite in being, knowledge, and power. As a result, God knows and controls his own being and all created beings by extension. For God, therefore, the real is the rational, and the rational is the real.¹² Creation is thus planned, executed, and known by an exhaustively personal God. This is the basis for a philosophy of cosmic personalism.

THE CREATOR AS THE SOURCE OF UNITY AND DIVERSITY

For Van Til, God is not only *a se*. He is also the source of both unity and diversity because he is eternally one and eternally three. Thus, just as the ultimate One-and-Many interrelate within God's being, so the derivative one-and-many interrelate within the created order. Because God interweaves the unity and diversity of creation, he establishes both the unity and the diversity of the subject and object of knowledge. Moreover, he establishes both the diversity of the facts as well as their rational integration within created structures accessible to the human mind. It is this reconciled unity and diversity that makes human knowledge possible.

To see this point more clearly, let's contrast the Trinitarian approach with a Buddhist approach to the same problem. In response to the Vedantic philosophers of India, the Buddhist philosopher Vasubandhu argued that the world's diversity cannot result from an ultimate unity.¹³ This argument was expanded by the Buddhist logician Dharmakirti. However, in making their case, the Buddhist logicians so championed the diversity of the world that they denied its unity. Thus, these Buddhist philosophers could not embrace a reality characterized by interdependent unity and diversity. For the Christian, however, this is not a problem because the interdependent unity and diversity of the created order derives from the ultimate unity and diversity of God.

THE CREATOR AS A COSMICALLY PERSONAL ENVIRONMENT

For Van Til, Trinitarian theology also supports human experience by establishing a cosmic personalism as the enviroing context for human activity. In this regard, the Holy Spirit becomes the personal medium who permeates, envelops, and interweaves the structures of creation. However, since the personal identity of the Holy Spirit is itself defined through his relationships with the Father and the Son, the entire Trinity enters into the personal mediation of the Spirit. Consequently,

¹² Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 36–37.

¹³ Richard Hayes, "Principled Atheism in the Buddhist Scholastic Tradition," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 16 (1988): 11. Hayes argues that Buddhists invariably rejected any notion of a "unity that is composed of a plurality of components." To underscore this point, he then adds, "To give an exhaustive account of all the occurrences of the Buddhist treatment of the one-many problem would be to tell nearly the whole story of Indian Buddhist philosophy, which is a bit like a symphony played on a one-stringed violin." Hayes: 20.

personal experience is possible because humanity operates against the background of the entire Trinity and thus within a cosmically personal environment.

It were quite legitimate and true to say that the foundation of all personal activity among men must be based upon the personality of one ultimate person, namely, the person of God, if only it be understood that this ultimate personality of God is a triune personality. In the Trinity there is completely personal relationship without residue. And for that reason it may be said that man's actions are all personal too. Man's surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God.¹⁴

SUMMARY

In this section, I have presented a threefold argument to support Van Til's contention that the Trinity constitutes the transcendental ground of personal human experience. First, because God is triune, he is an absolute person and thus the creator of the universe. Second, because he is eternally one and eternally three, he is the source of both temporal unity and temporal diversity. Finally, as the cosmically personal environment, God weaves human operations into a unity and also establishes the personal quality of each one. Thus, it is precisely because God is triune that personal human experience is possible. This is the Christian's central presupposition in an apologetic encounter.

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THE POINT OF CONTACT OF PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

A central topic in apologetic discussions is the point of contact.¹⁵ Establishing a point of contact is a way of seeking connection between the Christian and the non-Christian so that the two do not talk past each other. It is for this reason that classical apologetics assumes that both parties have facts and reason in common. Although we have seen that this assumption is wrong, its intent is wholesome. For apologetics to work, the Christian must connect with the non-Christian.

¹⁴ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 78.

¹⁵ I wonder if Lutherans might consider the discussion in this section to be wide of the mark. After all, since the word of God is living and active, it makes its own point of contact *ex nihilo*. Regardless of how one views this discussion, however, it does not affect the contours of the presuppositional method.

Within the method of presuppositional apologetics, this is done in two ways. First, the Christian enters the non-Christian system to connect with the non-Christian way of viewing things. Second, the non-Christian then enters the Christian system to connect with the Christian way of viewing things. In both cases the point of contact is suppositional. It is made merely for argument's sake.

However, there is a deeper anthropological issue here since the non-Christian operates on two levels simultaneously. In this regard, Van Til speaks of three types of consciousness in the history of humanity to date: (1) original Adamic consciousness, (2) fallen consciousness, and (3) regenerate consciousness.¹⁶ For the non-Christian the old man or woman is the original Adamic consciousness, and the new man or woman is the fallen consciousness. By virtue of creation in God's image, the non-Christian has an original Adamic consciousness, which is in possession of the truth metaphysically. But by virtue of the fallen consciousness, the non-Christian also seeks to suppress this truth epistemologically.¹⁷

In making its point of contact, therefore, the dual method of presuppositional apologetics connects with both of these anthropological levels. The negative thrust of the method enters the non-Christian system in order to deconstruct the epistemological suppression of the fallen consciousness. By contrast, the method's positive thrust appeals to the suppressed knowledge which the non-Christian retains metaphysically by virtue of the original Adamic consciousness.¹⁸ This gives the suppressed knowledge an opportunity to rise. However, for the apologetic encounter to be successful, God must regenerate the non-Christian through the revelational claims that are pressed upon him.¹⁹ In other words, apologetic success is not a product of the method alone. Rather the non-Christian must be grasped by the Spirit working through the word.

IN CONCLUSION: APPLICATION OF THE PRESUPPOSITIONAL METHOD

Having set forth the presuppositional method together with its theological and anthropological bases, I would now like to consider its application. In an apologetic encounter, it is not necessary to rehearse the details of Trinitarian theology every time. Often this theology remains in the background providing a basis for the method. Of course, in an encounter with a trained philosopher, one may have to lay bare the foundation of one's thought and trace out its implications in detail. But this does not happen in every encounter. Furthermore, it is seldom necessary to be overly formal: first deconstructing the non-Christian view and only then moving on to consider the Christian view. Often the discussion moves back and forth. In this back-and-forth movement, however, the presuppositional method provides a flexible framework for structuring the discussion.

¹⁶ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 48–50, 171, 172, 210, 211.

¹⁷ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 92, 95, 169, 170, 210.

¹⁸ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 207, 208.

¹⁹ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 197, 212, 213.

To illustrate this flexibility, I would like to relate a story of how I once used this method in an informal bar room conversation. I was sitting next to a man who was skeptical about Christianity. His basic issue was the problem of evil. His mother had been a devout Christian but was killed by a doctor due to a surgical accident. The man was grieved by the loss of his mother and could not imagine how a good and powerful God could allow his mother to die in this way. I sought to answer him in a way that connected with both his argument and his grief.

I told him that his pain and sense of loss were appropriate as was his anger toward the doctor. But I also told him that he could not account for these phenomena in the universe of matter in motion that he was assuming. In such a universe, there would no basis for right and wrong. After all, what one bag of chemicals does to another bag of chemicals can be neither right nor wrong; it simply is. And so, I told him that I could not answer the problem of evil, but that if his assumptions were true, he could not even pose this problem in the first place.

Only if the world was created by a personal God could good and evil exist as categories. Only in such a world was his mother's death wrong. Only thus was there a basis for his anger and grief. Only in a God-created world, did he have the intellectual categories to argue against God's existence in the first place! In other words, he had to assume the truth of Christianity to argue against it. As gentle tears came to his eyes, I knew that my argument had hit home. Whether this man ever became a Christian or not, I do not know. My job is simply to witness. It is God's job to convert.

Presuppositional apologetics is a powerful method that is consistent with Lutheran theology. I pray that this article will make this method accessible to a Lutheran audience and that you will be blessed in using it. ☩

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