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Apologetics and the Authority of Revelation

In this concluding chapter on Reformed apologetics, we will summarize this model or paradigm for apologetics, illustrate its use in practical apologetic encounters, and then consider its major strengths and weaknesses. Because of the diversity of methods within this tradition, we will focus on Gordon Clark and Cornelius Van Til, with special emphasis on Van Til.

The Reformed Apologetics Model

As explained in chapter 3, we are summarizing each model of apologetics under two headings (metapologetics and apologetics) and six specific questions under each heading. Here we apply this analysis to the Reformed model.

METAPOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Metapologetic questions deal with the relation of apologetics to other forms of human knowledge. In chapter 13 we considered the approach taken in Reformed apologetics to answering questions about knowledge in general, theology, philosophy, science, history, and experience. Here we summarize our findings in that chapter.

1. On what basis do we claim that Christianity is the truth?

Classical apologists seek to demonstrate the truth of Christianity by establishing the theistic worldview using primarily deductive reasoning, and then to show that Christianity is the most coherent or well-supported theistic religion. Evidentialists seek to build a cumulative case for Christianity through historical and scientific evidences, using arguments that are primarily inductive in form. Reformed apologists consider both approaches flawed.

Gordon Clark agrees with classical apologists in making deduction primary—in fact, he regards it as the only proper form of reasoning—but he faults them for trying to infer God's existence and nature from the empirical facts of nature and history. According to Clark, for deduction to produce meaningful results, one must proceed from an axiom that is beyond proof or argument and from which a coherent view of reality and morality can be sustained. Clark finds only one such axiom to be available—that Scripture is God's word.

Van Til considers deductivism an inadequate philosophy of logic but agrees that apologetics cannot rest on an inductive examination of facts either. His solution is to show through transcendental reasoning the foundation on which both deduction and induction rest; only Christian theism provides this foundation, or presupposition. Human reasoning and ethical judgments presuppose a God who is supremely rational and good and who made human beings in his image. The fact that people in their natural state do not recognize this image is proof that it has been darkened by sin. If we are to have our rational and moral faculties restored, we need a divine work of regeneration, that is, we need what Christ offers us in his work of redemption. Thus knowledge, reason, and ethics, if they are to be rationally grounded, presuppose the whole of Christian theism.

Reformed apologists do not expect non-Christians to be converted as a direct result of this argument. Only regeneration, a work of the Holy Spirit, can convert a person. Indeed, only regeneration can enable a person to acknowledge the truth that the apologist is presenting.

For many classical apologists, at least certain foundational truths of the Christian faith, such as the existence of God, may be regarded as "provable" in a fairly strict sense, approaching logical or rational certainty. In evidentialism the truths of Christianity may be "proved" only in the same sense that other factual claims can be proved—with some degree of probability, stopping short of rational certainty. Reformed apologetics seeks to prove Christianity as well, but in a different way. Essentially, Reformed apologists argue *from the impossibility of the contrary*—that unless Christianity is true, there is no way to prove anything. In this approach, as Van Til emphasizes, everything proves Christianity true, and the proof is absolute and irrefutable.

Contemporary Reformed apologists agree with their classical and evidentialist counterparts that postmodernism is an unacceptable and irrational approach to knowledge. Unfortunately, as Reformed apologists see things, traditional apologists tend to assume a modernist philosophy as the stance from which to refute postmodernism. Thus classical apologists treat postmodernism as the abandonment of the belief in absolute truth (whatever one happens to think that it is!) for the belief in the relativity of all beliefs. Evidentialists criticize postmodernism on the grounds that it flies in the face of the facts, as if facts had meaning apart from the philosophical framework in which they are viewed. Reformed apologists suggest that postmodernism should be viewed as simply the current form of unbelieving philosophy, with the pendulum having swung from an unbelieving rationalism (modernism) to an unbelieving irrationalism (postmodernism).

2. What is the relationship between apologetics and theology?

Reformed apologists agree with evidentialists, over against classical apologists, that apologetics and theology deal with the same subject matter and should use essentially the same method. However, they disagree with the inductive, empirical method advocated by evidentialists. According to Reformed apologists, in a consistently Reformed method the truth of Scripture should be presupposed in both theology and apologetics, and specific truths deduced from the statements or propositions given in Scripture. Van Til qualifies this dogmatic method of apologetics, though, by introducing the transcendental argument. In brief, this argument seeks to show that what has been deduced from Scripture must be true if anything we claim to know other than what is deduced directly from Scripture is to be intelligible. By way of contrast, Clark's thoroughgoing deductivism leads to the conclusion that human beings really cannot know anything that is not in Scripture or deducible from Scripture.

3. Should apologetics engage in a philosophical defense of the Christian faith?

Classical apologists seek to articulate Christian theism using methods and presuppositions taken from non-Christian philosophy (say, that of Plato or Aristotle) as a way of commending Christianity to non-Christians on their own terms. They believe that arguments for theism and other elements of the Christian faith can be developed using philosophy. Evidentialists prefer to see philosophy essentially as a critical tool for clarifying concepts and presuppositions and for analyzing the methods used in science and other disciplines, including theology.

Reformed apologists, on the other hand, call for the development of a distinctively Christian philosophy that is based on methods and presuppositions taken from Scripture. This philosophy will essentially present the same truths as Christian theology but in different terminology.

4. Can science be used to defend the Christian faith?

Whereas classical apologists cautiously relate the Christian view of creation and nature to the findings of science and evidentialists make such comparisons enthusiastically, Reformed apologists are generally highly critical of modern science. Rather than seeing the resolution of any potential conflict between science and theology in philosophical scrutiny (classical apologetics) or further study of the facts (evidentialism), Reformed apologists see an irresolvable conflict between believing science and unbelieving science. They argue that the non-Christian proceeds from a standpoint of faith in the ultimacy of chance, whereas the Christian proceeds from a standpoint of faith in the ultimacy of God.

This view of science has led most Reformed apologists to endorse the young-earth form of creationism. Clark's denigration of all inductive reasoning as fallacious leads him to hold to a nonrealist view of science, specifically operationalism, which views science as descriptive of operations in the laboratory, not of nature itself. Some apologists who follow Van Til also draw on the work of nonrealists, notably that of Thomas Kuhn, to show that scientific theories presuppose an interpretive community working from an agreed set of assumptions. However, these Van Tilian apologists in the end accept a heavily qualified realism.

5. Can the Christian faith be supported by historical inquiry?

Reformed apologists are critical of inductive historical arguments in apologetics, especially as practiced in evidentialism. Clark rejects induction outright. Van Til does not, but he does criticize apologetic arguments that use inductive reasoning to defend the biblical truth claims. Both apologists criticize such arguments because their conclusion is that Christianity, or some part of Christianity, is probably true. Van Til insists that apologetic argument should reason transcendentally that unless the facts are what God in Scripture says they are, there is no rational ground for finding any meaning or significance in facts at all.

6. How is our knowledge of Christian truth related to our experience?

Classical apologists appeal to the near universality of religious belief and the desire for religious experience as proof that there is a transcendent source of personal meaning that all human beings need. Evidentialists appeal to the objective facts of history as the basis on which non-Christians should be encouraged to pursue the experience of a relationship with Christ; testimonies of changed lives are offered as supplemental evidence that such experiences are real. Reformed apologists object to both approaches because they treat Christianity as one of many forms of religious experience (even if the only *true* form). They argue that the proper method is to appeal to the image of God that is in all people, and to point out its obscurity within the non-Christian, as proof of the need of regeneration. Rather than seeking proof of God in "religious" experiences, Van Til argues that we should contend that attributing meaning to any and every experience presupposes the existence of God.

APOLOGETIC QUESTIONS

Apologetic questions deal with issues commonly raised by non-Christians. In chapter 14 we considered the approach taken by Reformed apologists to answering questions about the Bible, Christianity and other beliefs, the existence of God, the problem of evil, the credibility of miracles, and the claims of Jesus Christ. Here we summarize our findings in that chapter.

1. Why should we believe in the Bible?

In both classical and evidentialist apologetics, the apologetic argument first establishes the existence of God and his revelation in the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, and culminates in the inspiration of the Bible. Reformed apologists (specifically presuppositionalists) turn the argument around: the Bible should be believed as the starting point for all knowledge. For Clark this is because knowledge requires an axiomatic starting point, and the Bible provides one. For Van Til the Bible should be the starting point in a transcendental sense. That is, the apologist should argue that unless the God who speaks in Scripture is real, human knowledge is without an intelligible basis.

2. Don’t all religions lead to God?

Classical apologists argue that religious pluralism is irrational because the different religions have different worldviews and different conceptions of God. Evidentialists argue that religious pluralism does not consider the fact that only Christianity offers verifiable factual evidence of God taking the initiative to make himself known to us. Reformed apologists generally consider these points to be basically correct but inadequate (and they would warn against inviting non-Christians to verify these claims on their own terms).

They respond to religious pluralism with two basic points. First, it is really a nonexistent position; the religious pluralist is actually assuming an exclusivist stance based on some religious perspective, stated or unstated. Second, Reformed apologists such as Clark and Van Til argue that only Christian theism presents a worldview or a transcendent point of reference in terms of which knowledge and ethics are possible or intelligible. Non-Christian religions make man or chance ultimate; Christianity alone makes God truly ultimate and alone presents the means (in Christ's redemptive work) by which sinful man can come to recognize and honor God as the absolute personal Creator.

3. How do we know that God exists?

Classical apologists advocate one or more of the theistic arguments, which prove the existence of a God. Evidentialists typically rework these arguments into fact-based, evidentiary forms. Reformed apologists uniformly contend that these arguments are unnecessary and that belief in God can be (or even should be) a properly basic belief. They also usually argue that the theistic proofs in both their deductive and inductive forms are logically flawed. For Clark this means that theistic proofs such as the cosmological argument should simply be abandoned. Van Til, on the other hand, advocates reworking them into one proof that is transcendental, rather than deductive or inductive, in form. That proof is that unless God is presupposed, there is no accounting for the world, its order, or moral standards.

4. If God does exist, why does he permit evil?

Classical apologists focus on the deductive problem of evil: How can God be all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, yet evil exist? Their usual answer is that God permits evil

because of the greater good resulting from creating beings with free will. Evidentialists characteristically deal with the inductive problem of evil: Does the great amount of evil count as significant evidence against God's existence? They argue in effect that the positive evidence for God's existence more than counterbalances the negative evidence of evil.

Reformed apologists generally object to the free-will defense because it conflicts with the biblical view of God's sovereignty. (Plantinga is a notable exception.) They also take exception to the evidentialist approach of weighing evidence for and against God's existence: on a Reformed view of things, *everything* in God's world must count as evidence for God's existence. The reality of God must be presupposed even to make the judgment that something is evil.

Conservative Reformed apologists such as Clark and Van Til stoutly defend the Calvinist teaching that God foreordains everything that happens. They argue that God is not liable for sin because, although he is the ultimate cause of everything, he is not the direct or proximate cause of sin. Clark unabashedly describes his position as determinism. Van Til adheres to a form of theological determinism but rejects physical determinism, emphasizing that the ultimate cause is the transcendent person of God.

5. Aren't the miracles of the Bible spiritual myths or legends and not literal fact?

To the question of whether miracles are myths or facts, the classical apologist answers: look at the worldview of which those miracles are a part. The evidentialist answers simply, look at the evidence. The Reformed apologist essentially sides with the classical apologist here, but takes the point one step further: look at the *whole* worldview of which the miracles are a part. Theism in the abstract does not prove that miracles have occurred. The biblical miracles are to be believed because they are part of God's self-revelation to us. Reformed apologists criticize the

evidentialist argument for the resurrection of Jesus for failing to challenge the skeptic's philosophy of fact and evidence. Even if a non-Christian were convinced that Jesus rose from the dead, Reformed apologists suggest, he could always dismiss it as an unusual chance event.

6. Why should I believe in Jesus?

Van Til's answer to this question is disarmingly simple: because Jesus is God. To put it more fully, since Jesus is God, what he says about himself in Scripture (which is Christ's own word to us) carries its own authority and is self-validating. There is no higher standard by which the self-identification of God can be made. The foundation of our apologetic, then, should be the self-attesting Christ of Scripture.

The following table presents an overview of the Reformed model of apologetics with these twelve questions in mind.

Issue		Position
Metapologetics	**Knowledge**	Coherence with revelation is the test of truth Postmodernism is irrationalist form of modernism Spirit's witness is the origin of faith
	Theology	Apologetics and theology both based on Scripture Apologetics presupposes the truth of theology
	Philosophy	Apologetics confronts unbelieving philosophy Christians should develop a Christian philosophy
	Science	Rejects theories that are viewed as unbiblical Believers and unbelievers view facts differently Typically young-earth creationism
	History	Objective truth about history given in Scripture Right view of history based on revelation
	Experience	God's image in man is the point of contact Test all experiences by Scripture

Apologetics	**Scripture**	Scripture the foundation of apologetics Begin with self-attesting Scripture Scripture gives the only coherent worldview
	Religions	Religious pluralism is self-refuting Christianity presents uniquely absolute God
	God	Traditional theistic proofs are rejected Transcendental or epistemic argument for God
	Evil	Theological problem of evil: Did God cause sin? Evil can be deemed such only if God exists
	Miracles	Miracles are part of Christian theistic worldview Miracles are revealed in God's self-attesting Word
	Jesus	Jesus is the self-attesting Christ of Scripture Jesus should be believed because he is God

Reformed Apologetics Illustrated

In this, the third of four dialogues we will present in this book, a Christian named Cal becomes involved in a discussion with Sarah and Murali while stranded at an airport during a snowstorm. Cal teaches world history at a Christian high school and has done a lot of reading in Reformed theology, and is especially interested in biblical ethics. He is a staunch Calvinist and an advocate of the Reformed apologetic of Cornelius Van Til. When Cal sits down next to Sarah and Murali, they are already bemoaning their flight delay.[1]

Sarah: I can't believe we're stuck here. If this storm doesn't lift soon, I'm not going to get home in time for Christmas.

Murali: Things like this happen. It can't be helped.

Sarah: My mother always told me that everything happens for a reason. Well, I'd like to know what the reason is for this.

Murali: In the religion of my people, we are also taught that everything happens for a reason, but we are not able to see it.

Sarah: Do you still believe that?

Murali: I don't know. I'd like to believe it, but it is hard sometimes.

Sarah: Well, I can't believe it anymore. There are too many terrible things that happen in this world for no good reason.

Cal: Excuse me, but is it all right if I join in the discussion? My name is Cal, and I would greatly enjoy passing the time with you.

Murali: Certainly. My name is Murali, and this is Sarah.

Cal: Glad to meet both of you. I heard what you were talking about, and I do believe that everything happens for a reason.

Sarah: Really? So, what's the reason for our flight delay?

Cal: Well, of course, the immediate reason is that the airport officials have made the decision, with which I of course agree, not to allow any planes to take off during this snowstorm.

Sarah: We all understand that. But I think what Murali was saying was that there was some kind of cosmic reason for everything—some kind of overall purpose that explains why bad things like this happen. Do you think there's any such reason for our flight delay?

Cal: I'm sure there is.

Sarah: Well, what is it?

Cal: I don't know what the specific reason is for this particular situation. There may be many things going on as a result of this flight delay that we know nothing about that will result in some good. But I know that good will be accomplished because of it. If we knew everything

that was happening right now, and everything that was going to happen as a result of this flight delay, we would be able to see that great good was going to be the end result.

Murali: As I said, I would like to believe this very much. But we do not know everything that is happening or that will happen. How can we know that everything will work out for good?

Cal: Because there is Someone who does know everything that is happening and that will happen, and he is the one who has a plan to work everything out for good.

Sarah: Don't tell me, let me guess—God, right?

Cal: Right!

Sarah: Well, I personally have a hard time believing in God.

Cal: That's quite understandable. In fact, in a sense that's why this plane delay has happened.

Sarah: What? Are you saying God is punishing me because I don't believe in him?

Cal: That's not exactly my point. My point is that all of the difficult, painful, and bad things that happen to us happen because all of us—the entire human race—have failed to believe in God, to honor him as our Creator and King. And God has ordained that things like this happen in part as a way of bringing to our attention the fact that we need to be restored to a right relationship with him.

Murali: In the Hindu religion in which I was raised, we are taught that difficult things happen to us because of the law of karma. We are taught that such things help us on our way toward spiritual perfection in the cycle of reincarnation.

Cal: It sounds like you don't believe that anymore.

Murali: I am unsure. Again, I would like to believe that there is some reason for the things that happen. I respect your right to your religious opinion, as I respect the religion of my family and my country. But I do not think anyone's opinion is better than anyone else's.

Cal: I agree that none of us has the right to claim that our own religious opinion is better than anyone else's. However, what I have been telling you is not my opinion. It is what God himself says about the matter in the Bible.

Murali: I respect the Bible, and I know that it comforts many people. I have no problem with you saying that you have found your answer there. I'm sure your answer is true for you. But I cannot agree that any one religion is the truth. I believe that there are many valid religions and all of them express truth about God as they understand it.

Cal: But in expressing that opinion, Murali, you are actually saying that my view is *wrong*.

Murali: How can that be? I have just said that I think your view is one of many truths.

Cal: But that's just the problem. Basic to my answer to the problem of evil is the belief that there is only one truth, because there is only one true God. What I am trying to tell you is that he has determined what is true and false and what is right and wrong, and that if it's not his answer, then it's the wrong answer. So if you say that my answer is not the *only* right answer, you're actually saying that it is the wrong answer.

Murali: But this is so intolerant, for you to claim that only your answer is God's answer.

Cal: Actually, that's not what I said. What I said is that *God's* answer is the one that we should accept as the only true answer. My answer is just my best attempt to explain God's answer. I don't see how it is intolerant for me to say that we should accept God's explanation for things.

Sarah: But you're assuming that God exists.

Cal: You're exactly right. I am assuming or presupposing that God exists.

Sarah: But isn't it unreasonable just to assume that God exists? I don't think it's reasonable to believe in God without proof.

Cal: Actually, I do have proof. I have it on the highest authority that God exists. You see, God has spoken. He has revealed himself in Scripture, which is God's word.

Sarah: So you believe in God because you believe in the Bible, but you believe in the Bible because it's God's word. That's a textbook case of circular reasoning. My philosophy professor told me that there were people that argued like this, but you're the first person I've met who did.

Cal: I understand your objection, but in the nature of the case I don't think circular reasoning can be avoided here. Let me ask you something. What is my name?

Sarah: Cal. Why?

Cal: How do you know?

Sarah: You told us that was your name.

Cal: Exactly. And you believed me, correct?

Sarah: Well, sure. Why not? I mean, you would know, wouldn't you?

Cal: Absolutely. And God knows who he is, too.

Murali: I'm afraid I don't follow.

Cal: Here's what I'm saying. If I tell you my name, you will normally accept what I say without question unless you have some reason to be suspicious. If you did have reason to question my identity, you could try to find confirmation from some higher authority. For example, you could ask to see my driver's license to see if the state concurs with my self-

identification. But in the case of God, there is no higher authority one can consult to confirm that he is speaking. If God—the true God—speaks, his word will be self-attesting or self-validating. And we have such a self-attesting word from God in Scripture.

Murali: But what makes your scripture self-attesting? After all, there are many religions with many scriptures. Why cannot God be speaking through them, too?

Cal: Actually, most of the world's religions do not have a scripture that even professes to be the word of the self-attesting God. They may have scriptures that speak about various gods, but the scriptures do not even claim to be the word of an absolute, personal, self-attesting God. None of the Eastern religions have such scriptures, for example.

Sarah: What about Islam? The Muslims have the Qur'an, and it claims to be dictated by God to Muhammad.

Cal: Islam is about the only other religion that even makes a similar claim for its scripture. But in fact, historically Islam is a derivative religion that depends on what Muhammad took from the Jews and Christians he encountered in Arabia. Islam officially claims that its god is the same God as the God of the Bible. The question is whether God actually spoke through Muhammad. Since the Qur'an contradicts the Bible on several crucial points, its claim to be God's word must be rejected.

Sarah: But why should we accept your claim that the Bible is God's word? Why can't we simply dismiss that as your opinion? Can't you offer us some kind of proof?

Cal: I can, but it may not be the kind of proof you want. The proof that the Bible is God's word is that if you don't accept what it says as the truth, you will not be able to give an account of anything you think you know to be true. In fact, every reason you can possibly give against belief in the Bible in one way or another really assumes the truth of what it says.

Sarah: Huh? That doesn't make any sense. Can you explain that?

Cal: Let me try. Why don't you tell me why you don't believe in the God of the Bible.

Sarah: That's easy; it's just what we were talking about before. The God of the Bible is supposed to have created everything, which means he created evil, or at least created the creatures that became evil. He is supposed to be all-powerful, which would mean that he could stop evil anytime he wants to. He is supposed to be all-loving, which would mean that he'd want to stop evil right away, maybe even before it got started. But evil has been around for a long time, and God hasn't done anything to stop it. So it seems that either God doesn't exist at all, or that if he does exist he either isn't all-powerful or he isn't all-loving. Which is it?

Cal: Actually, in a kind of backwards way your argument proves that the God of the Bible must exist.

Sarah: How can that be?

Cal: Well, the argument as you have stated it assumes that there is such a thing as evil. But how do you determine what is evil and what is not? Calling things "evil" assumes that there is a standard of good that transcends the world or the human race. That standard of good is God. So your argument against God's existence is self-contradictory, because you're saying that there cannot be a Being who is the standard of goodness because there are departures from that standard of goodness in the world.

Sarah: Why do we have to believe in a God to recognize something as evil? Are you saying that atheists or agnostics can't tell right from wrong? That's pretty insulting.

Cal: No, actually I'm saying the opposite. I'm saying that you are quite correct in seeing evil in the world. But that evil wouldn't be *evil* if there were no God. What we call evil would just be stuff that happens that we don't like, or at least that some of us don't like. Atheists and

agnostics can and do recognize much evil for what it is. They are right to regard ignorance, superstition, murder, child abuse, and the like as evils. Atheists are like people who can tell right away when a fine painting has been spoiled by vandalism, but who don't believe that an artist produced the painting. What I am saying is that if there is no God, then these things aren't really evils; they're just things we don't like.

Murali: You have raised some interesting points. But I see now that the snowstorm is lifting and they are getting ready for us to board our plane.

Sarah: We still don't have a good reason why God would want our flight to be delayed.

Cal: I don't know that I agree. Perhaps one of the many good things God was doing was setting things up so that we would have this discussion. Murali, do you have a copy of the Bible?

Murali: Actually, no, I don't think I do.

Cal: If you give me your address, I'd be happy to send one to you at no cost or obligation. After all, you can't hear God speaking in Scripture if you never read it.

Murali: That is most kind of you. I would be happy to receive a Bible.

Sarah: I've already got one—two, actually.

Cal: I hope that you will read it again and consider what we've talked about. Thanks for letting me horn in on your discussion.

Notable Strengths of Reformed Apologetics

Reformed apologetics is really the newest of the four approaches discussed in this book, and it is easily the most controversial and misunderstood. But even most of its harshest critics have recognized some of its strengths, which are considerable. We will highlight just a few of them.

LINKS APOLOGETICS AND THEOLOGY

Reformed apologists have made a powerful case for recognizing that apologetics inevitably presupposes theology. That is, the apologist has a specific understanding of Christian theology that informs his method as well as the substance of his defense of the Christian faith.

Consider first the substance of apologetic argument. One's specific theological convictions will unavoidably affect the substance of one's answer to the perennial apologetic issue of the problem of evil. If one does not believe in free will, then clearly one cannot (or at least should not!) use the free-will defense as part of one's theodicy.

Theological perspectives also affect apologetic method. If one believes that all human beings have an inner sense of divinity by which they really know that God exists, whatever they may tell themselves or others, that will affect how one argues for God's existence. For example, the apologist who has this view of the unregenerate is not likely to agree to shoulder the burden of proof on the question of God's existence.

Reformed apologists have demonstrated that it is impossible to present a generic apologetic for "mere Christianity" that does not assume a specific theological stance. C. S. Lewis (whose primary apologetic work bore the title *Mere Christianity*) clearly wrote from an Anglican theological perspective. However much he might have liked to represent all Christian traditions, in fact his views on a variety of issues were quite specific and came out in his apologetics. Lewis held, for example, to a strong doctrine of free will. Apologists ignore or gloss over such theological matters to the detriment of their efforts.

RAISES EPISTEMOLOGICAL AWARENESS

Probably the central and most distinctive aspect of Reformed apologetics is its emphasis on reckoning with the epistemological dimensions of belief and unbelief. Reformed apologists have forced apologists of other approaches to become more aware of their own epistemological framework as well as those of the non-Christians they are seeking to convince. This epistemological consciousness-raising has a number of elements.

First, Reformed apologists have made a forceful case for recognizing that there is an epistemological divide between Christians and non-Christians. Although this divide must be properly qualified (and Reformed apologists are not always careful in this regard), in principle Christians and non-Christians are committed to radically opposed assumptions about knowledge. Christians recognize that our knowing faculties have been corrupted by sin and need restoration through the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Non-Christians generally do not recognize this situation. Christians regard God as knowable yet incomprehensible to human beings. This is a difficult balance for most non-Christians, who tend either to view God as utterly beyond knowing (a view shared ironically by agnostics and mystics) or to insist that God must be rationally comprehensible to us (a view shared, again ironically, by atheists, many theological liberals, and some cultists).

Second, Reformed apologists have made apologists of all approaches more aware of the role that presuppositions play in human thought in general and in religious thought in particular. It is not so much the stated assumptions or beliefs as the unstated presuppositions that prevent non-Christians from taking Christianity seriously. Reformed apologists have taught us to look beneath the surface of what the non-Christian is saying, to look for the hidden or unarticulated belief or attitude that is driving the position he is actually articulating.

Third, Reformed apologists rightly emphasize that a discussion of only facts may prove fruitless if the non-Christian's philosophy of fact is not challenged. There is likely little use in trying to debate the scientific evidence for creation versus evolution with a non-Christian who assumes that science must look at all the facts from an assumption of naturalism.

Fourth, Reformed apologists should be heeded when they warn apologists to be careful not to compromise their own commitments epistemologically when defending the faith. For example, there is much to be said for avoiding the line of reasoning that the evidence for God's existence outweighs the evidence against it. Surely in God's world, even marred by sin, there cannot be any real evidence against God's existence.

OFFERS STRONG RATIONAL CHALLENGE TO UNBELIEF

All orthodox Christian apologists agree that apologetic arguments in and of themselves cannot produce conversion. Still, assuming apologetics has any value or utility in evangelizing non-Christians, some arguments are surely better than others. And the transcendental argument used by Van Til has a great deal to commend it.

First, from a Christian point of view the premise of the argument surely must be regarded as true. God is the presupposition of all meaning, knowledge, logic, fact, and moral value and judgment. It is because God exists that all these things are what they are, and it is because we were created in God's image that these things can be intelligible to us.

Second, the transcendental argument is applicable in any context and in relation to any question. Classical and evidentialist apologetics require some familiarity with specific philosophical arguments or with various bits of information, and tend to plow over the same ground repeatedly. Van Til's transcendental argument, on the other hand, maintains that any and

every fact is intelligible only on the presupposition of a rational, absolute, and personal Creator whose universe reflects his nature. The argument may even be used in response to a direct denial of some aspect of Christian truth, because it points to the conditions that make affirming or denying any particular truth claim meaningful and intelligible.

Third, the transcendental argument puts non-Christians on the defensive. The burden of proof is laid on them to give an alternative account of the rational ground of meaning or morality. They are confronted with their philosophical prejudice against Christianity and their need for a changed attitude toward the God of the Bible.

These strengths are only some of the reasons why apologists of all traditions should seek to learn from the Reformed apologists.

Potential Weaknesses of Reformed Apologetics

First let us consider a common misunderstanding about Reformed apologetics: it is not a kind of fideism. In Part Five we will explore this approach to apologetics in depth, but here we simply point out that fideism denies that there can or should be any rational argument given directly in support, defense, or vindication of the Christian faith. Now, admittedly some Reformed apologists at times sound fideistic. As we have emphasized throughout, the four approaches highlighted in this book do not usually appear in "pure form" in the work of specific, real-life apologists. Just as those who identify themselves as classical apologists sometimes reason like evidentialists and vice versa, those who consider themselves to be Reformed apologists sometimes reason like fideists and vice versa. Moreover, arguably Abraham Kuyper, the father of the Reformed apologetic tradition, had strong fideistic leanings and could with justice be labeled a fideist.

On the other hand, it is a fact that the twentieth-century Reformed apologists profiled here have vigorously repudiated fideism in name and substance. Plantinga denies that reasons are necessary, but he does not deny that they can be used. Clark is routinely castigated for his rationalism, a criticism that is hard to reconcile with his being a fideist. In fact, he argues for the truth of Christianity on the grounds of its uniqueness as a coherent system of knowledge. Van Til insisted against Kuyper specifically that the Christian faith can and should be defended rationally, and developed his transcendental, presuppositional argument as a method for doing just that within a staunchly Calvinistic perspective.

The main reason for the frequent charge that Reformed apologists are fideists is that they often characterize the argument for Christianity as *circular*. Critics of the Reformed approach typically charge that this argument is fallacious. William Lane Craig, for example, writes: "As commonly understood, presuppositionalism is guilty of a logical howler: it commits the informal fallacy of *petitio principii*, or begging the question, for it advocates presupposing the truth of Christian theism in order to prove Christian theism." However, Craig goes on to acknowledge that "at the heart of presuppositionalism" is its "epistemological transcendental argument."[2] This is the argument that Christian theism must be true because it alone makes all meaning possible. At its best, then, the Reformed approach does not beg the question of the truth of Christianity. Its argument is "circular" only in the sense that it seeks to show that ultimately all argument and proof are possible because the God of which Christianity speaks does exist.

Although the charge of fideism is generally inappropriate, the Reformed apologetic approach is susceptible to some significant potential weaknesses or deficiencies. These problems may not all apply to every Reformed apologist, and it may be that Reformed apologetics can be developed or nuanced to overcome all of these difficulties. In any case, there are some

reasonable concerns that various critics have expressed and that are worthy of serious consideration. We will highlight three of those here.

ASSUMES A RIGIDLY DOGMATIC CALVINISM

Advocates see the Calvinistic stance of Reformed apologetics as its great strength—and it may be—but it may also be viewed with some justice as its major weakness. The problem here is not the specific theological affirmations distinctive to Calvinism that play a role in the Reformed apologetic. The problem, rather, is the tendency among Reformed apologists to engage in relentless critique of other Christian theologians and apologists—even other Reformed apologists—on exceedingly narrow grounds, sometimes to the relative neglect of actual engagement with non-Christian thinkers.

The pursuit of "consistent Calvinism" has been something of a perennial in the conservative American Calvinist tradition, and has in general been unhealthy. The protracted war of words between Van Til and Clark in the 1940s and beyond is just one of the sorrier examples. Both sides continue to this day to maintain that their champion was grossly misrepresented—and, by our estimation, both sides are right.

While apologists cannot avoid adopting specific theological points of view, they can avoid the excessive dogmatism and party spirit that has marked the conservative wing of the Reformed apologetic tradition. We should mention that in recent years apologists in this tradition have begun to overcome this weakness. John Frame and Vern Poythress have both written books emphasizing the need for Christians of varying theological perspectives to learn from one another.[3] Frame's major book on Van Til strongly criticizes the "movement mentality" among many Van Tilians and offers some trenchant criticisms of Van Til's writings.[4] William Edgar, a

professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, has argued that Van Til and Francis Schaeffer were not as far apart as Van Til himself seems to have thought.[5] These writings offer encouraging signs that the Reformed apologetic movement may be maturing out of this particular weakness.

UNDERESTIMATES THE POWER OF FACTS

Reformed apologists rightly stress the importance of challenging the philosophy of fact presupposed by non-Christians. However, they overstate the case when they maintain that facts alone cannot persuade non-Christians to embrace a Christian worldview and faith. The truth is that one valid and effective way of challenging people's faulty philosophy of fact is to confront them with facts that do not fit their philosophy. This is essentially what evidentialists seek to do by arguing empirically and inductively in defense of biblical miracles and fulfilled prophecies.

In this connection we would suggest that non-Christians are rarely willing to accept the "bare fact" of the resurrection of Jesus and then relegate it to the realm of the unexplained, as Van Til so often claimed. The vast majority of atheists, skeptics, and advocates of Eastern and New Age religious perspectives who have written about the Resurrection either deny that it occurred or claim there is no way to know what happened. Defenders of alternative religions and philosophies—even ones that conceivably might make a place for it—nearly always refuse to admit that the Resurrection was an historical fact. The reason is obvious: even non-Christians with a strong worldview of their own recognize that the resurrection of Jesus as an historical fact cannot be isolated from its context as the decisive vindication of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and the Lord and Savior of the Christian church. We think this pattern shows that presenting the facts supporting the Resurrection can itself go far to bursting the bubble of non-Christian worldviews.

PLACES EXCESSIVE RESTRICTIONS ON APOLOGISTS

Following up on the point just made, Reformed apologists unnecessarily limit themselves in the kinds of apologetic arguments they can and will use. Both Clark and Van Til refuse to use any sort of inductive, empirical argument for Christianity. Van Til acknowledges the legitimacy of induction, but refuses to allow it any real place in apologetics. He claims the only valid proof for Christianity is the transcendental proof.

One of the assumptions underlying this narrow approach is the idea that any apologetic argument that concluded with an affirmation that some aspect of biblical faith was probably true would be dishonoring to God. After all, how can we say that God *probably* exists, or that Jesus *probably* rose from the dead? But this objection implicitly assumes that the apologist is asserting that God's existence or Jesus' resurrection is *merely* probable. An argument that concludes that, based on this or that specific set of facts, the swoon hypothesis is highly improbable is not asserting that in fact it might be true. Likewise, an argument that concludes that the Resurrection is, for a specific set of reasons, the most probable explanation does not imply that one cannot be certain about the Resurrection in some other way.

Reformed apologists contend that the theistic proofs as traditionally formulated are logically flawed. Perhaps they are, but then again perhaps they are not. Hume and Kant critiqued the arguments from avowedly non-Christian presuppositions. Perhaps the arguments can be (and already have been) developed in ways that overcome the skeptical philosophers' criticisms. Ultimately, of course, all theistic arguments that are sound must be grounded in assumptions and presuppositions that are true because this is God's world. But that does not make the arguments unsound.

The following table summarizes the major strengths and weaknesses in the Reformed model of apologetics.

Reformed Apologetics	
Notable Strengths	***Potential Weaknesses***
Establishes close relationship between apologetics and theology	Assumes a narrowly dogmatic form of Calvinism
Inculcates awareness of epistemological factors in belief	Underestimates the value of empirical argument in apologetics
Presents strong rational challenge to unbelief	Limits apologists to a restrictive and rather abstract apologetic

Conclusion

Reformed apologetics is a relatively new, dynamic tradition that offers some forceful and surprising ways of defending the Christian faith. However, certain aspects of the movement's history and theology make it difficult sometimes for Reformed apologists to avoid falling into fideism. Yet, as we have seen, Reformed apologetics represents a distinct approach to defending the faith that appeals to rational standards and is characteristically opposed to fideism.

But what exactly is fideism, and why even consider it in a book on different approaches to apologetics? We will explore these questions in the next major part of this book.

For Further Study

Geehan, E. R., ed. *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*. Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971. Essays discussing the pros and cons of Van Til's position, including frequently discussed critiques by Herman Dooyeweerd, John Warwick Montgomery, and Clark Pinnock.

Nash, Ronald H., ed. *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1968. Essays by and about Clark, including critiques of his position by Nash and others.

Sproul, R. C., John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley. *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Academie, 1984. Popular book criticizing Van Til's apologetic method as fideistic; see Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, 401-422, for a reply.

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[1]Some elements of this dialogue are inspired by a sample apologetic dialogue included by John Frame in his book *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*, 203-217. (In Frame's dialogue, John talks to a non-Christian named Al while both are in flight on an airplane.)

[2]Craig, "A Classical Apologist's Response," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, 232, 233.

[3]John M. Frame, *Evangelical Reunion: Denominations and the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986); Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Academie, 1987).

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[4]Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995).

[5]William Edgar, "Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared." *Westminster Theological Journal* 57 (1995): 57-80.