

Speak to the Dead: Presuppositionalism and the Proclamation of the Gospel

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Credit where it is due: I didn't come up with the title of this session. I presume that the title originated with our host pastor. "Speaking to the dead" highlights the central paradox of apologetics, and indeed of evangelism itself. The paradox is this: the unbeliever is dead, but he must hear and obey the gospel. That means that, although he is dead, we must *tell* him the gospel, and *urge* him to believe it. As apologists, we have the task to *convince* this dead man that Christian belief is rationally defensible. Apologists must not only speak to the dead—we *argue* with the dead.

And when we say that the unbeliever is dead, we don't mean *Princess-Bride*-esque "mostly dead." He's dead.

Thus, speaking to the dead is an apologetic paradox. And while there are some theological clarifications that we can make, we need to affirm that this paradox represents one of the mysteries of Christianity: there are truths here that we must affirm (because God has revealed them), even if we find ourselves incapable of fully reconciling them.

This is not the only paradox of apologetics. Quick question: according to the Bible, does the unbeliever *know* God? Hopefully, you stuttered a bit in answering, because the Bible says that the unbeliever both knows God and does not know God.

Romans 1:21

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

2 Thessalonians 1:8

...in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

1 John 4:8

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

If you're following along, you should be able to see that these two paradoxes (that the unbeliever is both dead and living, and that he both knows and doesn't know God) are interrelated, for "this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Because these paradoxes are *biblical* paradoxes, the most faithful way to handle these difficulties is to strive for even greater biblical fidelity. Such a pursuit for biblical fidelity, then, ought to shape our approach to defending the faith. In my estimation, then, this pushes us in the direction of Cornelius Van Til's school of apologetics, most commonly known as presuppositionalism.

Apologetics, and Van Til

What is the task of apologetics? As suggested above, I believe that the work of the apologist and the work of the evangelist are related. Indeed, they *must* be related. Woe to the apologist who forgets this, boasting of winning the argument when he has lost the man!

Although both apologetics and evangelism have as their ideal goal the conversion of the unbeliever, the difference between the two tasks becomes clearer when that man remains unconverted. In such cases, the evangelist has successfully evangelized when he has proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ so that the unconverted man ought to despair of his lack of *righteousness* before God.¹ The apologist has been successful if the unconverted man has been made to see his lack of *rationality* before God. As we will see, these are also related ideas: ultimately, in epistemology as in soteriology, we gain justification by faith alone.

But how are we to demonstrate the irrationality of unbelief to the unbeliever? This is the central question of apologetic methodology. To begin to answer this question, we must recognize first that every worldview includes not only its distinctive beliefs, but also standards for evaluating the acceptability of any belief. For instance, metaphysical naturalism as a worldview is not only committed to the tenets of metaphysical naturalism, but also to using naturalism as a filter for accepting and rejecting evidence.

You might see quickly that this presents the problem of circularity. At some level, though, such circularity is unavoidable. If we are evaluating the worthiness of our worldview, we must do so either by using the standards that the worldview itself offers or on the basis of some other standard. It seems obvious that if I evaluate the worthiness of my worldview by means of some other standard, *that* standard is actually my ultimate commitment.

It therefore follows that, at the level of *ultimate commitment*, all worldviews are circular. But if this is the case, we have a tough job as apologists. Let me offer the following chart for your consideration.

	On believing standards	On unbelieving standards
Belief	Is acceptable	Is not acceptable (though we keep trying!)
Unbelief	Is not acceptable	Is not acceptable (surprisingly!)

The first column is contains no surprises. On the standards implicit in the Christian worldview, Christianity is an acceptable position. And on those same standards, unbelief is not an acceptable position. So far, we are not shocked, but neither are we enlightened in any meaningful way.

¹“The Christian call to evangelism is a call not simply to persuade people to make decisions but rather to proclaim to them the good news of salvation in Christ, to call them to repentance, and to give God the glory for regeneration and conversion. We don’t fail in our evangelism if we faithfully tell the gospel to someone who is not converted; we fail only if we don’t faithfully tell the gospel at all” (Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007): 81–82).

The second column is more challenging, and yet it is this second column that is most relevant to the task of the apologist. Here, we are asking what kinds of arguments, evidence, and conclusions might be acceptable given the standards implicit in an unbelieving worldview.

The long-sought silver bullet of apologetics is an argument or piece of evidence to place in the upper right box: a way to make Christian theism acceptable on the standards already embraced by the unbeliever. This is the ambition of the classical approach to apologetics and the standard employment of theistic proofs and evidences. The goal of traditional apologetics is to begin with some premise that the unbeliever is quite willing to concede on his own terms, and then build from that foundation to the rationality (or even truth) of Christianity.

From a Van Tilian perspective, however, the goal of placing items in the upper right box is misguided from the outset, and the reason has to do with the nature of conversion and saving faith in God *as God*. Let me illustrate this idea.

Imagine Adam in the Garden, facing his decision to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He has been given two conflicting “expert opinions” on the consequences of eating the fruit: God has said that it will result in his death and the serpent has said that it will grant him divine wisdom. So what ought Adam to do? Suppose that his answer is to pick a fruit off the tree, summon a nearby Garden creature, and feed the fruit to it. Upon watching the animal stiffen and fall over dead, Adam reaches the conclusion that God is right, and that he will obey God. Has Adam responded to his probation in a faithful way?

The obvious answer is that he has not. The Word of God being what it is, it cannot be *faithfully* believed because it was validated by some other authority. Consider Paul’s words to the Thessalonians: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13). Note the implications here: receiving the Word of God *as* the Word of God is functionally equivalent to conversion itself.

The author of Hebrews also insists that God’s Word is itself the highest authority. “For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:16–18). God’s Word (his oath) is the only proper validation for God’s Word (his promise).

It is possible, of course, to receive the Bible as *true* without necessarily receiving it as the Word of God—or, at least sections of it. This is precisely the problem with our hypothetical Adam: he has come to the conclusion that God’s Word is true, but has done so in such a way as to deny the *authority* of God’s Word. He denies that *God is right because God is God*. Instead, he accepts that *God is right* because God has met the standards of empirical science, or of archeology, or ethics, or whatever other standard might function as ultimate in an unbelieving worldview.

This, Van Til suggests, is the problem with the upper right box. The entire apologetic approach that aims to fill this box is self-defeating. We simply cannot reach the conclusion that “Jesus is

Lord of all” by beginning with the premise, “This unbeliever is lord of all” (the most basic commitment of all autonomous thought).

For these reasons, the Van Tilian approach to apologetics emphasizes the second surprising entry in the second column: that on the standards implicit in the unbelieving worldview, unbelief itself is an unacceptable position. The goal of a presuppositional apologist, in practical conversation with an unbeliever, is to show that most basic commitments of an unbelieving worldview are fundamentally incompatible, not with Christianity, but with the basic commitments of unbelief itself.

Van Til reminds us of something absolutely vital to practical apologetics: unbelief is not a neutral position. Far too often, our defense of the faith assumes that *everyone*, believer and unbeliever alike, agree on basic facts and the procedures of finding truth, and that we, as Christians, are proposing some additional set of beliefs for the unbeliever to consider. Indeed, most *unbelievers* have this same understanding of evangelism. If this really were the case, the entire burden of proof would rest on the believer.

But this is not so. The unbeliever has a worldview, and I have a different worldview. In the conflict of ideas that is a conversation about Christianity, *both of us* have obligations to defend our most basic commitments. On a practical level, this is likely the single most important point that I will make today. The recognition that believer and unbeliever alike have positions that require defense changes the nature of the apologetic task immensely.

Because Christianity is in fact true, all other systems of thought (which, by definition, reject the truth of Christianity) are not only false, but must self-destruct at some critical point. The apologist, then, needs to be deliberate about finding these weak points. Van Til calls this the *internal critique* of unbelief. With an internal critique, we accept the unbeliever’s worldview, not to build on it, but merely for the sake of argument. Our goal is to show that, even on its own terms, it cannot be sustained.

Examples of the Quicksand Quotient

In Scott Oliphint’s recent introduction to Van Til’s apologetic,² he offers a memorable label for the internal critique of unbelief: he admonishes the apologist to look for the “quicksand quotient” in any unbelieving system. That is to say, because an unbelieving worldview will be self-contradictory, it will sink under its own weight. Let me offer a handful of examples of the quicksand quotient in practice.

Naturalism Against Itself

Alvin Plantinga has articulated what he calls the “evolutionary argument against naturalism.” The full argument is complex; a simple version of it as follows:

1. Naturalistic evolution contends that adaptations that favor *survival* are most likely to become prominent in ensuing generations.

²²K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principle and Practice in Defense of our Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013).

2. One such adaptation in humans is their rational faculties.
3. Thus, it follows that in some way, rational faculties of people are best adapted for survival.
4. This is no guarantee at all, however, that our rational faculties are aimed at *truth*.
5. Thus, if naturalistic evolution is true, there is good reason for the naturalistic evolutionist to lack sufficient confidence that any of his beliefs are true, including that of naturalistic evolution itself.

If you follow this argument carefully, you will see that it has the properties of an internal critique: it grants the ultimate commitments of the opponent, then demonstrates that these ultimate commitments, followed exactly, actually undermine themselves.

Finding Meaning in Life

Next, consider this claim, common among those influenced by the New Atheism: even if a religious belief increases personal peace and goodwill within a community, we ought not believe it if we know that it is false. The idea here is that the side benefits of a belief are never enough to justify knowingly holding false belief.

In response, we need to take seriously the claims implicit in the atheist worldview. There was a time, as the atheists tell it, when nothing was thinking or valuing; there will be a time, at the end of all things, when again nothing will be thinking or valuing. Their universe is a place in which *matter* is both prelude and postlude to *mind*—which is only a brief interlude. Our existence, with all its pretensions of significance, is an aberration, an anomalous blip in billions of years of blah. As one of their own poets have said,

Brief and powerless is Man's life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way; for Man, condemned to-day to lose his dearest, to-morrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day; disdaining the coward terrors of the slave of Fate, to worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.³

Bertrand Russell was a far better spokesman for atheism than anybody whose life has overlapped mine. But give special attention to the way in which he seeks to retain man's dignity: in order to endure his miserable and brutish years, he must "worship at the shrine his own hands have built." That is to say, in order to find value in this life, our only option is to believe the lies we tell ourselves.

And so the rich irony of the atheist position is that, to whatever degree he's consistent with his own beliefs, he must insist that life has no meaning other than that which we create for it. There

³Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," 1903 (available at <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/fmw.htm>).

is no *meaning* in the universe. Therefore, for the atheist, *all* the hope and meaning that *anyone* has in this life rests on accepting a lie. The atheist cannot exempt himself from the criticism he lobs at religion, and so his critique evaporates; from his perspective, he has chosen his happy delusion and I mine.

But note: the unbeliever has already taken the bait: *he is talking to you*. Clearly, he thinks that people *ought* to believe certain things, that we have some *obligation* to embrace only true beliefs. But that kind of obligation only exists in the Christian theistic universe. The unbeliever refuses to play by his own rules. No, it's worse: he *can't* play by his own rules. Nihilism, if true, cannot be believed. Nihilism, if believed, cannot be true.

The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is an attempt at an internal critique of Christianity, and this why it truly is the most difficult question for the apologist. As an internal critique, it attempts to demonstrate that basic Christian beliefs (that God is good, that God is all-powerful, and that evil exists) create an unresolvable conflict. Since evil is self-evidentially real, belief in a good and powerful God must be abandoned.

However, most people who would use the argument do not understand the idea of an internal critique; for these opponents of the faith, we can actually turn the problem of evil back on their own position.

If the unbeliever claims that *this particular event* (a hurricane, an abusive parent, etc.) is obviously evil, it may be useful for the believer to challenge him to explain how, on the unbeliever's worldview, *anything* can truly count as being evil. Evil is a universal concept, and further, the judgment that a given act is evil means that it is worthy of being condemned. However, on an unbelieving worldview, the concept of *ought* is without foundation. Thus, the unbeliever's outrage that God would allow *this particular thing to happen* is not even meaningful on his view of reality.

We need to acknowledge that this response to the problem of evil is quite inadequate; indeed, it is really no answer at all. Nonetheless, it remains a useful reply, only because it turns the tables, putting the unbeliever on the defensive. We owe him a better answer than this, ultimately, and we should not shirk that responsibility. Nonetheless, we also should take advantage of the opportunity to show him the defects of his own set of ultimate commitments.

Some Practical Pointers

If we're going to contrast worldviews with an unbeliever, the unbeliever has to have a worldview. Let's be blunt: most people haven't given a moment's thought to the foundations of their epistemology or ethics. The reality is that if we are going to run an internal critique on our neighbor's worldview, we are almost certainly going to have to give him an assist at constructing a worldview to critique.

For this reason, when someone expresses skepticism to you about the truth of Christianity, learn to ask questions. Sometimes, these questions are simple: you're told that the Bible is "full of errors," so you ask your conversation partner to name one. In so doing, you're actually seeking

to determine the kind of evidence that he finds convincing. In some cases, the questions can go much deeper. For Van Til, those questions tend to run in the direction of *knowledge*: how, if man is the final reference point for truth, is knowledge possible? How can we relate the particulars of our experiences to the universal categories that make them intelligible?

While I agree with Van Til's analysis of the problem of knowledge, I've found that discussions of epistemology are almost always far too esoteric to be of any use in ordinary apologetics. Perhaps you minister in Ann Arbor; I pastor in the Upper Peninsula. Your situation might drive you to a more academic defense of the faith, and I believe Van Til's apologetic will bear that weight. But I also want to show you that a presuppositional apologetic works at a simpler level.

Because all unbelievers bear the image of their Creator, there are certain things that we know about them even before engaging them in discussion. We know that they *know God* (Rom 1:21). And we know that, as image bearers of God, they have some sense of right and wrong. In many cases, their intuitions are sound: the law of God is written on their hearts (Rom 2:15). In other cases, their suppression of the truth cases them to proclaim that good is evil and evil, good (Isa 5:20).

In any scenario, you will be dealing with a person who is convinced that there are moral realities and that these realities are more than mere preferences. The person who insists that relativism is right and that you are bigoted for forcing your views on others is still expressing a set of moral judgments.

Once you find an issue about which the unbeliever has strong moral convictions, press him to justify his conviction. Why, for instance, should the government ban abortion (or, contrariwise, protect the practice of abortion)? For our purpose, either conviction will get the argument going. What we're seeking is some explanation for why, on an unbelieving worldview, we have any kind of moral obligations at all.

We should recognize, as we have already mentioned, that even as the unbeliever is entering the conversation with us, he is assuming certain sets of moral obligations. The conditions of meaningful conversation include refraining from speaking falsehoods, a willingness to follow evidence, and so forth. And so even to speak in defense of unbelief makes no sense, given the truth of unbelief. This is precisely what Van Til means when he says that "antitheism presupposes theism." The preconditions of meaningful conversation simply don't exist on the unbelieving worldview. The unbeliever must steal from the Christian worldview even to mount his opposition to God.

Obviously, if Christianity is true, we do have moral obligations, and very specific ones at that. The call to the unbeliever, then, is not to give his approval to Christianity on the terms of his unbelief, but to renounce his entire worldview and embrace the only worldview that makes sense of life as he (an image bearer of God) knows it to be.

Knowing God is Life

For Paul, the unbeliever's deadness is related to his failure to think rightly:

Ephesians 4

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

If we are to speak to the dead, we must do so in the only way that can bring life. Now, when Paul tells us that that the unbeliever is “alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them,” he certainly must mean the same thing Jesus means when he says, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” The “ignorance” that alienates from life is failure to know God. And so our goal as apologists is to be the means by which the Spirit of God, through the Word of God, brings the unbelieving to know God in the way that brings life to the dead.

This knowledge of God is not merely cognitive. In the saving knowledge of God, God is not a logical posit, an interesting hypothesis that makes our philosophy work out. Nor is God the conclusion of a chain of argumentation. Remember, if we come to accept God’s authority on the basis of anything other than God’s authority, we remain idolaters still.

Indeed, because all people *know God* (not in a saving way), all people already have a “personal relationship with God.” The question, then, is the *nature* of that relationship: do we recognize God as God, responding to him in humble submission, or do we resent his Lordship, clinging to our own delusions of autonomy?

An idea that is made explicit in the Westminster Confession of Faith,⁴ the necessity that God condescends to his creation by means of covenant is, for Van Til, one way of expressing the exhaustively *personal* nature of not only God and his image bearers, but also of the created environment in which those image bearers live, move, and have their being. All of reality is personal; all of God’s image bearers live *coram Deo*; and all creation is revelatory, because it is itself the spoken word of God made visible (“Let there be light,” and so the light is a revelation of God).

Because God created all things, everything is what it is because God declared it to be that way. It follows, then, that the created world is *revelation* of God: the tree is not *just there*; rather, the tree is there because God told it to be there. And this applies not just to the location of the tree, but to every fact about the tree, including its relationships to all of the other facts in God’s universe. When God declares, “Let there be light,” light, *as God already conceived of it*, comes into existence. All of its properties are pre-determined by God; God learned nothing about light upon its creation.

The reality that creation is, at every point, determined by God means that all of creation comes to man pre-interpreted. The meaning of any part of creation exists, prior to and apart from

⁴Chapter VII.1: “The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.”

man's discovery of it. Truth is not something that man constructs out of the raw material of his empirical experiences; truth exists even if man does not. It is on this basis that Van Til denies the existence of brute facts. Therefore, all interpretive acts are done either in submission to the revelation of God and thus in a covenant keeping way, or with the assumption of autonomy, which is the essence of covenant breaking.

This means that reality creates ethical responsibilities; we are obligated by God to believe what he has said about his creation. That reality creates ethical responsibilities is evident in the contemporary debate over gender identity.

All of this means that when we speak to the dead, we must do so in such a way as to call them to a whole-souled repentance. A defense of the faith that calls for anything less radical has failed to be fully biblical.

As Van Til said:

Intellectually sinners can readily follow the presentation of the evidence that is placed before them. If the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian position is only made plain to them, as alone it can be on a Reformed basis, the natural man can, for argument's sake, place himself upon the position of the Christian. But though in this sense he then knows God more clearly than otherwise, though he already knew him by virtue of his sense of deity, yet it is only when by the grace of God the Holy Spirit removes the scales from men's eyes that they know the truth existentially. Then they know him, whom to know is life eternal.