

IS EVIDENCE REALLY NECESSARY?

Dr James Grier

Is it necessary to prove the existence of God in a seemingly atheistic rationalistic society? Must we all preaching and witness first establish the reasonableness and credibility of the faith, and of the Bible in particular? 'No,' reply those who subscribe to the so-called 'presuppositionalism' proposed by Cornelius Van Til. Here Dr James Grier, formerly Dean of Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, unravels a debate so central to vital evangelism.¹

At Westminster Theological Seminary I studied under Cornelius Van Til, Edward J. Young, John Murray and a host of other godly reformed men. Dr Van Til was a great challenge to me because he was a man who spoke in one language and thought in another. If you have ever tried to read his books you will know that he does not think in the English language. Though he writes in English, it is very opaque writing.

When Dr Van Til would lecture in the class-room, you would be about 10 minutes into the lecture and he would revert to Dutch, and he did not even know he had done so!

in Apologetics under Dr Van Til (John Murray being my adviser) and I came to appreciate the man – not only for the distinctiveness of his apologetical system and the keenness of his theological mind – but also for his personal godliness and piety. He was truly a godly man – a wonderful example of how one can achieve academic excellence and remain a humble servant of the living God.

A questioning mind

The issues that Dr Van Til raised go back to when he taught at Princeton Seminary, before the break came when he joined with J Gresham Machen and others in the founding of Westminster Seminary. He had been taught the apologetic system of B B Warfield as a student at Princeton. As he reflected on the implications of the Warfield apologetic, he began to ask questions about whether it was appropriate to try to demonstrate or prove the existence of God.

It was, of course, the Enlightenment which brought our present understanding of what constitutes rationality. The very word *enlightenment* prejudices us! The most Christian era in history is known as the Dark Ages, while the most benighted age in Western history is called the Enlightenment!

It is from the Enlightenment thought of Rousseau, Voltaire, and especially Immanuel Kant, that our current understanding of rationality has been gained. This understanding runs along these lines: that for something to be rational, one has to be able to demonstrate its proof using either deductive or inductive means. And if one

¹ This article from the Metropolitan Tabernacle's *Sword & Trowel*, 1992 No.1, is based on an address about a "Summary of Van Til's system of apologetics" that Dr Grier gave at the 1990 Summer School of Theology at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. It is reproduced by Steve R. Scrivener with the permission of Dr Grier and the Metropolitan Tabernacle.

cannot demonstrate its proof by these means, then it is not rational to believe or hold that view.

This understanding of what is rational has led to the rise of a system of theology called *natural theology*. Natural theology is an attempt, by the use of reason, to demonstrate the existence of God as being rationally acceptable. But Dr Van Til raised the most basic question imaginable. He asked whether the Enlightenment position was an adequate understanding of what constitutes rationality. Should we take the God of the Bible and submit Him to the ruling rationality thesis of the day? Should we accept that we must be able to demonstrate, either inductively or deductively, the existence of this God?

Basically, there have been three approaches to the understanding of what constitutes rationality. The first I have just described, and I will call it *classical evidentialism*. This says that for something to be rational, you must have evidence for it. The evidence must be adequate to provide a basis for the belief. (Classical evidentialism may be traced in measure all the way back to Aquinas and, before that, to Aristotle.)

Dominant influence

The enlightenment statement of this view has affected the Christian community very strongly, and Christian scholars as diverse as William Paley and B B Warfield have accepted it, and tried to demonstrate the existence of God on the basis of evidentialism. Apologetics in both America and Britain is now dominated by what we commonly call *evangelical evidentialism*. According to this view, faith in God can be demonstrated as being rational by the use of evidence.

It would take up much space to list all the authors who hold this position. Some well-known writers are Norman Geisler (*Christian Apologetics*), John Warwick Montgomery, Clark Pinnock, R C Sproul, John Gerstner, and, of course, B B Warfield, who we have already named. A recent writer whose books have become very popular in the United States (through Campus Crusade) is Josh McDowell. He is completely committed to this evidential position, holding that if belief in God is going to be a rational belief, then we must be able to demonstrate its truthfulness by evidence.

Norman Geisler holds that all you have to do to demonstrate the truth of theism (existence of God or gods) against anti-theism is to use the cosmological proof for the existence of God (arguing from the existence of the universe).

Geisler argues that by using deductive reasoning you can destroy every anti-theistic position, so that every rational man will be forced to hold theism. The question then becomes – what kind of theism – Christian monotheism, polytheism, henotheism, deism or pantheism?

At this point Dr Geisler says that in order to demonstrate that Christianity is the only rational form of theism, we must leave deductive reasoning and turn to inductive reasoning. By this means we shall show that Christian theism best explains the range of phenomena, and is the most rational and probable answer to the questions which arise.

The outcome of all this is that the Bible will be vindicated as being true *through the judgement of men*. But says Geisler, once you have used your rational mind to judge the Bible to be true, then the Holy Spirit moves in and gives you internal certainty, and you no longer use your mind to verify its truthfulness – you simply accept it.

Josh McDowell's books bear titles which indicate the same process of reasoning, such as *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. When you encounter an unbeliever, you let

him be the judge, and you put the Bible on trial. But if we think about this, we soon realise that there is something wrong here, because when we take the Word of God to an unregenerate person, it is that person who is on trial, not the Lord or the Bible!

It is *God* Who speaks in the Bible, and Who stands as Judge of men and women. If you put man in the seat of autonomy and invite him to come to Christ on the basis of his own good reason and judgement why should he, after he has come to Christ, give up his autonomy and submit to Christ? It is no wonder we have such difficulty getting 'converts' to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ when these apologetic methods are used in evangelism.

A second approach to rationality is really a non-rational approach called *fideism*. Tertullian was the father of fideism. He said: it is irrational, therefore I believe. Belief and rationality are opposites. Truth and reason do not go together. Faith and reason are diverse; and therefore if you *could* prove the existence of God rationally, it would not be worth believing, because belief functions where matters are rationally paradoxical. At times Karl Barth is not too far from this kind of position, along with the other neo-orthodox theologians.

A better approach

The third significant approach to rationality is, in my view, the alternative creatively put before the Christian community by Cornelius Van Til. Dr Van Til suggested that we must adopt a transcendental kind of argument. He said that God is not something or someone we should argue *towards*, but something or someone we must argue *from*.

God, if He is the Creator of Heaven and earth, is not an inference (deductive or inductive) from human activity. The whole basis for human activity is undergirded by the existence of God. The fact of God is the all-controlling fact that controls every other fact. Therefore, instead of starting with evidence to argue the probability of God by deduction, we must *start with God* in order to explain anything.

Perhaps this idea does not seem particularly insightful to our ears, for we are now used to it, but in Van Til's day this came as a bombshell to the reformed community, because reformed thinkers had been largely following the evidential apologetics of B B Warfield.

Cornelius Van Til's view is often called presuppositionalism because it makes the being of God the ultimate presupposition. God is not someone for Whom we must offer evidence. God is the transcendent presupposition that renders evidence for anything possible.

When Van Til developed this notion it necessitated a very distinct change in all the arguments which were being used for the trustworthiness of Scripture. Instead of arguing, for example, that the Scripture is trustworthy because prophecy has been fulfilled, we have to reverse the argument and say: prophecy is fulfilled because the Word of God is trustworthy.

Instead of arguing that we know the Bible is reliable because it changes the lives of people who believe it, we must now argue that *because* the Bible is reliable, it will have powerful consequences in the lives of those who believe in it.

We must frankly acknowledge that presuppositionalism was not well received in the evangelical community when introduced, and it is not well received today either. We have for too long accommodated our presentation of Truth to the ruling thought-patterns

of the age. Ever since the Enlightenment concept of rationality was asserted by the world, the church has adapted the presentation of its message to that pattern, and has marshalled evidence to demonstrate the existence of God, together with arguments of probability to establish the credibility of Scripture.

The latter arguments run along the following lines. You take the historical events of the Bible and get external historical and archaeological corroboration of them. If you find the Bible to be trustworthy in these *checkable* areas, you then assume that it will be equally trustworthy in *uncheckable* areas. We read, for example, that Christ died. Is this checkable or uncheckable? It is checkable. What about the statements that He died for our sins – are they checkable or uncheckable? Why, they are uncheckable. But if we can demonstrate from extra-biblical sources that the Bible is trustworthy in the first matter, then it makes sense to trust it when it makes assertions which cannot be checked. But is this such a wonderful proof of biblical authority?

The new approach

Cornelius Van Til came on the scene at a time when all the conservative scholars and writers were committed to such arguments, and he exposed the nakedness of the whole approach. He proposed an entirely different approach, proclaiming that: God is self-contained, self-directing, independent, uncaused, and possesses life in Himself. This supreme and self-contained God has chosen to reveal Himself – *and the authenticity of His revelatory activity is internal to the revelation.*

The Bible, said Van Til, is a self-authenticating witness to the Truth of God. By this thinking, the truthfulness of the Bible is not established by any criteria which are external to the Bible. The Bible is the *source* of all criteria by which we evaluate any attempt at finding truth. In the Bible we have the self-attesting witness of God.

We may protest that self-testimony cannot guarantee truth. This may certainly be so in person-to-person relationships, but it is not true in God-to-man relationships.

If the Bible is truly the speech of the living God, who can we call in to verify that God has spoken? If this God is self-contained, and He alone is God, whose word are we going to take that He has spoken? Of course, there is no one. Have you ever wondered why the God of the Bible, when He swears, swears by Himself? Who or what else could He swear by? Is there someone or something greater than Him to guarantee His veracity – the truthfulness of His Word?

If we say that we cannot accept the testimony of God about Himself without corroboration from others, then we will simply never hear the God of the Bible, Who says – *Let God be true but every man a liar (Romans 3.4).*

What is at issue in apologetics is *the starting-point*, and Cornelius Van Til came creatively to this presuppositional position and, through the work of John Murray, Edward J. Young, and Ned Stonehouse (two exegetes and a systematic theologian), he developed his apologetical system.

Van Til's most consistent contemporary disciple is John M. Frame of Westminster Theological Seminary, who has issued an excellent book entitled *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987). This is essentially class-notes that have been developed into a book. John Frame indicates his preference for the term *ultimate presupposition*, our starting point, our first point of reference, when we think of His being or of His Truth.

The first point for meaningful assertion is the existence of the God of the Bible. The being of God renders possible human knowledge, human being, human activity and everything else. We do not start with the *created* to get to the *Creator*. Without God there would be nothing to look at. Without God there would be no mind to think with. Without God there would be no standard for truth. Without God there would be no goal in history. Without God there would be no standard to judge the human will and conduct.

God, then, must be the necessary presupposition which renders significant human existence possible. He is the transcendent, necessary starting-point to understand man and to give significance to man.

Developments

There have been important and helpful developments in this 'tradition' of thought, and I shall commend some authors as being worthy of consideration. Alvin C. Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff have a really significant book on this subject entitled *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). An earlier book by Alvin Plantinga which is very helpful is – *God and Other Minds: A Study of the Rational Justification of Belief in God* (Cornell University Press, 1967).

What would you think if I walked up to you and said, 'Now before I am going to let you talk to me, you have to prove to me that you exist as a mind. If you cannot demonstrate with good evidence that you are a subjective person with a rational process and the ability to handle symbols and rules, then I don't wish to talk to you'?

How do you prove the existence of another mind? By rational argument? Why would you want to use rational argument to prove the existence of God? Could it be successful? I doubt it! Plantinga has worked through such issues in his book *God and Other Minds*.

Nicholas Wolterstorff has issued an excellent book, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Eerdmans, 1976), in which he attacks all forms of foundationalism. Foundationalism is the system derived from Enlightenment rationalism which says: here are some known truths; here is what we can deduce from them, and as long as we move deductively we can have certainty from these foundational truths.

Says Wolterstorff in essence, 'That is wrong! We have certain beliefs which we may call *controlled beliefs*. These are the foundation from which we must move to every other belief. They are not founded on argument; they *control* argument. They are *basic* to argument. They *undergird* argument. Without these controlled beliefs we cannot argue at all.'

Wolterstorff asserts that God is a controlled belief for Whom it is absolutely asinine to try to produce evidence.

Another writer in this field to be recommended is George Mavrodes of the University of Michigan, who has produced one of the most fascinating books I have read, entitled *Belief in God* (Random House, 1970). He argues very much like Plantinga. We might well describe the work of these scholars as the newer form of reformed epistemology, or the development of Van Tilian thought among current reformed thinkers.²

² Prof. John M Frame's work *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1987) includes a 19 page appendix entitled *The New Reformed Epistemology* in which he compares his own book with the reasoning of Alvin Plantinga, George Mavrodes and others.

Basic belief

Plantinga holds that there are essentially two kinds of belief. There are properly *basic* beliefs, and there are *non-basic* beliefs, the difference between them being that a properly basic belief is not something you argue *to*, it is something you argue *from*.

Non-basic beliefs are beliefs you argue to, and intermediate steps involving either inductive or deductive reasoning must be employed in order to get to those beliefs. The argument is:- God is properly *basic* belief. We must not argue *to* Him, but we must start with Him, for He renders other beliefs possible.

If we say that it is *irrational* to accept things without proof, then we must face the implication of such a basis of rationality, for it will shut us off from the great base of Scripture.

If we protest that this is subjectivism, the reply is a denial. New Van Tilian thinkers do not say that belief in God is ungrounded, but that there is no need for ground, because belief in God is properly basic. It is a proper and legitimate presupposition which is guaranteed by a self-authenticating Word from God. This does not mean that we *could not* give grounds for it; it means that we do not *need* to give grounds.

Let us reflect on Calvin's concept of the 'knowledge of God'. Do all men know there is a God, or do they not? If we reply in the affirmative, we then ask – is this true only in Western culture, or is it universally true? If it is universally true, we must then ask – is it then worthwhile taking hours to demonstrate the existence of God, even if we could do so, when all men know of His existence already?

The problem is not whether a man knows the reality of God, but that in his sinful rebellion he suppresses every evidence of it, and refuses to acknowledge the Creator and worship Him. Instead, he worships himself.

The Van Tilian system is therefore one which helps us to understand that we may have belief in God as a properly basic presupposition which we argue *from*. Does it mean that must set aside all evidence? Not entirely, for if anyone does have a problem with evidence, we will try to help that person, but we know that the real problem is not whether or not we can clear away certain aspects of evidences that confuse him, but his wilful suppression of what he already knows.

Inner knowledge

Romans 1 and *2* teach us, not only that all people know God and suppress that knowledge, but that all people also know that they are sinners and that they are worthy of death. Today, however, the Gospel is so often presented on the basis of – 'Do you want to be happy? Do you want to have a full and meaningful life? Smile, God loves you!' It is not presented in a way which uncovers and challenges that vital inner knowledge.

Scripture teaches that everyone we shall ever speak to *already knows* of the existence of the true and living God (through natural revelation), but suppresses that knowledge. As a consequence he refuses to worship the Creator, and worships the creature, so that God gives him up to the reprobation of his mind. Nevertheless, even in the midst of being given over to a reprobate mind, he knows that he is a sinner worthy of death.

Surely, in the light of all this, the essential point of Gospel contact with unregenerate people is a *moral* point of contact, not an evidential one. Sin is a moral issue, and the sinner already knows it; we do not have to prove it to him. We must, of course, be fully persuaded that people will never acknowledge their sin without the antecedent, gracious work of the Holy Spirit. But we must also be fully persuaded that it is our responsibility to deliver this *moral* Gospel to all people, and in Christ's stead beseech people to be reconciled to God.

Therefore, we should not be concerned to spend hours and hours proving the existence of God, and going through all the arguments to show the high level of inductive probability of the truth of the Bible and its worthiness of being believed, in order that people can be rational and still believe in God.

To us, people are doing the most irrational thing they could possibly ever do – they are *suppressing* that knowledge of their Creator which they already possess. This is the position which Cornelius Van Til would have us adopt – a radical form of apologetics. To my mind, it is the most consistent form of reformed apologetics to be encountered at the present time.

A final author in the field to be strongly recommended is Kelly James Clarke, a professor at Calvin College, Grand Rapids. His book, *Return to Reason* (Eerdmans, 1990), is the most succinct presentation I know of this new reformed epistemology in apologetics.