
AGAINST IDEOLOGICAL APOLOGETICS | *by Paul Helm*¹

I remember the first time I was asked whether I was a presuppositionalist or an evidentialist in apologetics. That was on my first visit to the USA, more years ago that I care to dwell on. The questioner put me on the spot, for I had never even thought about such a thing. It was rather like being asked whether I was in favour of freer trade with Outer Mongolia. Was I a Mason? How did I cook aubergines? The very asking of the question implied that there was an issue. But I'd simply never thought about the question or how it should be answered. Of course (I hasten to add) I had thought about presuppositions, for even as a beardless philosopher I'd learnt that any argument needs them: presuppositions or premises or assumptions. And (thanks to the kindness of the late Lew Grotenhuis) even in my teenage years I had been on the receiving end of the writings (those spiral bound Syllabuses)—of Cornelius Van Til. I knew (independently of Lew) of Gordon H. Clark. His book on reason, revelation and religion was a good read. Also (being an Englishman) I was more or less acquainted with evidentialists of the school of John Locke, and with the great tradition of teleological arguments for the existence of God.

So I knew a bit about presuppositions and about evidence, even in those callow years. I was even acquainted with the writings of those men dubbed 'presuppositionalists' and 'evidentialists' (and of course, for good measure, our old friends the fideists). (Incidentally, I don't think that the terms 'presuppositionalist' and 'evidentialist' are entirely felicitous, but that's another story.) What startled me was the way the suffixes rolled off the tongue of my friendly interrogator: was I a presuppositionalist, or an evidentialist, in apologetics? Did I favour presuppositionalism or evidentialism? I quickly came to learn that entire schools, whole Seminaries, were known—praised or excoriated—for their avowal of one apologetic *ism* or another. I was baffled, and (I confess) I still am baffled by this state of affairs. Perhaps more baffled than ever.

One thing that puzzled me was the degree of confidence shown in one or other *ism*. If you are a presuppositionalist you cannot not be an evidentialist; if an evidentialist then not a presuppositionalist. If you are a presuppositionalist you are clearly and manifestly and dogmatically one. If an evidentialist, likewise so. Also puzzling was the way in which such an *ism* was effortlessly bolted onto Confessional Christianity as another test of orthodoxy alongside the deity of Christ and gratuitous election. I think that I know where to look in the New Testament for evidence of Christ's deity and of God's free election. But what's the Scriptural basis of presuppositionalism or evidentialism? Where may this be found? It's not clear, is it? We'll come back to this question.

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The other thing that perplexed me was a presupposition that both the presuppositionalists and their evidentialist friends, (and sometimes, alas, their evidentialist non-friends: that also was puzzling) hold in common. This is the basic conviction that there are such things as apologetic *systems* and that every well brought up Christian ought to adhere to one, and only one, such system.

But the presence of the suffixes is tell-tale. It gives the game away, indicating a fundamental mistake, *the mistake of confusing tactics with strategy*. To see this, let's go back a step or two.

THE MISTAKE

Apologetics, the business of offering *apologiae* for the Christian faith or for some part of it is, presumably, a part of the missionary and evangelistic calling of the Church. That *strategy* is set by the Great Commission. It is (where the words are understood in a comprehensive sense), 'the preaching of the Gospel'. The New Testament also indicates the manner of such preaching: 'I am among you as the one who serves', (Lk. 22.27); 'The servant is not greater than his master', (Jn. 13. 16); 'I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling', 'Not in plausible words of wisdom. . . .' (I Cor. 1.3-4); 'For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake' (2 Cor. 4.5); 'To the Jews became I as a Jew, in order to win Jews' (I Cor. 9.20). The New Testament is full of such expressions. The Church fulfils her mandate when her preachers preach Christ, in the manner in which Christ should be preached. Matter and manner together. That, in a nutshell, is the *strategy*.

There is not, as part of that strategy, something in addition, a revealed apologetic system. There is no more a revealed apologetic system than there is a revealed way of heating church buildings. But there is a revealed Gospel and a revealed way of spreading it. This way of spreading it is, naturally enough, often given to us in the form of biblical examples. But a revealed apologetic? No. Not, at least, as far as I can see.

If the preaching of Christ in the manner in which Christ ought to be preached is the Church's *strategy*, what, then, are the *tactics*? *Apologia*, defence, is one tactic. In the case of tactics, there are no separate ends, but the means, the apologetic tactics, are justified by the ends. This, surely, is clear enough. Paul's preaches, delivering his *apologia* for the Gospel, differently in Lystra and Athens from Antioch and Thessalonica. In Lystra and Athens he appeals to what men and women enjoy in common, to nature. In Lystra he says: 'We also are men of like nature with you and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them'. (Acts 14. 15) In Athens likewise. Here, besides references to the creation, he appeals to Epimenides the Cretan (the author of 'in thee we live and move and have our being') and a pagan poet, Aratus, and treats the poet's words, 'for we are also his offspring', which were originally addressed to Jove, as words addressed to Jehovah. (Acts 17.28)

So what is Paul doing? What are his tactics? They differ from place to place. In Antioch and Thessalonica he 'presupposes' the Old Testament and Israel's divine election. (Acts 17.2, Acts 13) In Lystra, he appeals to the evidence of our common humanity. In Athens, he boldly commandeers an alien culture. In Corinth, or rather to the Corinthians, Paul appears to adopt yet another tactic. 'Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, yet. . . .' (I Cor. 1. 22) Paul's distancing himself from both Jews and Greeks must not be misunderstood, however. He discounts the 'wisdom of the world', yet later in his letter reasons cogently in defence of bodily

resurrection, taking as his starting point the gospel witness. (I Cor. 15) In turning his back on the wisdom of the world, Paul is not turning his back on all thought, or on all reasoning. Even when he is preaching Christ crucified, and distinguishing himself from both Jew and Greek, Paul is (at least) ‘presupposing’ logic. (This shows, incidentally, that apologetics has a place *within* the Christian community; it is not an exclusively evangelistic tool). But where’s the consistency in what Paul does?

There is a clear sense—dare I say it?—in which there is no consistency in what Paul does. At least, there is no uniformity. Is it consistent for a general to call for his troops to advance, and to call for them to retreat; to hide his troops behind smoke, and to reveal them in broad daylight? Yes it may be, if different situations calling for such different and apparently inconsistent tactics arise. Is that not the essence of Paul’s ‘all things to all men’? The principle is that he spoke and lived in any way that he judged to be best—the most effective—so long as the truth of what he proclaimed gained a hearing and was not thereby compromised or prejudiced. So long as manner does not get in the way of matter, but rather enhances it, Paul goes for it.

So where does apologetics fit into this? Apologetics is in the business of making space—intellectual, cultural, religious space—for the Gospel to do its work. It aims to remove prejudices, mistakes, misinformation, wilful ignorance of the gospel, to start from where people are, to utilise (in Karl Barth’s ambiguous phrase) a ‘point of contact’. Apologetics is person-relative and culture-relative. It has the difficult task of ‘manifesting’ the gospel ‘to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God’. (2 Cor. 4.2) The one gospel in the many different circumstances.

This point is clearly affirmed by the leading Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. His ‘Reformed Epistemology’, set forth in numerous writings, but magisterially in *Warranted Christian Belief*, has been widely misunderstood as there offering one connected apologetic for Christianity—and perhaps giving rise to yet another *ism* (Alvinism?) and has been criticised in these terms. How can one defend Christianity to its cultured despisers by appealing, as Plantinga does, to the *sensus divinitatis* and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit to the ‘Great Things of the Gospel’, it is asked, in tones of puzzlement? (For an example of such misunderstanding, see Richard Swinburne’s Critical Notice of *Warranted Christian Belief*, and Plantinga’s reply (in *Religious Studies*, September, 2001)).

Plantinga offers apologetic arguments in the book, the rebutting of objections to Christian belief, but he also (and primarily) addresses the Christian community, and how it can be that Christian belief might have warrant. In apologetic arguments Plantinga avows what has come to be called ‘negative apologetics’, the idea that apologetics has to do with the rebutting of objections which, if true, seriously undermine the faith. Naturally enough, he is particularly interested in philosophical objections, but there may also be historical and scientific objections to the Gospel, and no doubt other kinds too, also requiring rebuttal. On this view, the role of such rebutters is that of what John Locke called an ‘underlabourer’. It is to attempt to provide or protect the ‘space’ in which the proclamation of the Gospel may intelligibly occur.

In the absence of a revealed apologetic, the devising of apologetic arguments and approaches is a case where ‘is’ and ‘ought’ come close together. We may note the varied ways that Christ speaks, in parables, solemn warnings, sarcasm, critique, and the ways in which the apostles preach, together with the even more varied ways in which men and women are brought to Christ, and we let what we discover influence how the gospel ought to be angled. So apologetics is concerned not with the creation and preservation of a system, but by the very opposite: by empathy, imagination, appropriation, inventiveness.

APOLOGETICS TODAY

As part of his task the apologist appraises his contemporary cultural scene. Let's do some of that now.

What do we find today? We find that in modern Western culture at least everyone is—in a manner of speaking—a presuppositionalist. Only the name has been changed. Today it is called 'context'. We each have our contexts. This claim is offered as a necessary truth about the human condition. We each have our own individual or tribal starting points, which, it is held, are the outcome of our 'situation'. So currently pluralism is all the rage. Social pluralism, of course. But of more importance to us is what currently piggybacks on such social pluralism, namely epistemological pluralism. We each have our own views, (in the classroom this usually comes out as 'worldviews' or 'conceptual schemes'), and (so it is claimed) each is as equally valid as the other. In such a relativistic climate the impact of Christian presuppositionalism is inevitably muffled, if not completely emasculated. 'You Christians have your presuppositions? Scripture? Inspired? Is that so? Really interesting. My own preference is for Occultism/ Buddhism/psychoanalysis. Except at weekends. Then I go walking and worship nature.'

'Context' is the tribute currently paid to human autonomy and cultural diversity. In modern understandings of diversity, there is a pantheon, and the God of Christianity is up there with all the rest. Presuppositions are tolerated and welcomed, and so the distinctiveness of the Christian gospel is neutralised and neutered by all the points from which men and women start. Objectivity is in peril. So I say, such a cultural mindset demands of Christians that they adopt new tactics. Not the tactic of 'presuppositionalism' but of some other. But of what?

If we stand back from that question a moment, and reflect on our faith and its relation to human culture as this is conveyed to us in Scripture, we observe two striking features. On the one hand, there is sameness with the culture—common structures, as seen in the sense of divinity, the conscience, common human values, (about honesty, for example), the 'natural'. Sometimes the testimony of Scripture to 'nature' is overt, sometimes it is incidental. There is one creation, and human beings are all part of it, acknowledging and benefiting from its structures even in a fallen world.

Then there is the biblical testimony to difference. Christians are not of the world, Christ's kingdom is not an earthly empire. There is contradiction, objection, and conflict between the Gospel and its competitors. We use various terms to name the samenesses—creation, nature, common grace—and other terms to indicate of the difference—election, grace, prophecy, miracle, new birth. Some terms, like covenant and law, bridge the difference. The Christian faith is neither Gnostic, adopting an inaccessible language, nor naturalistic, reduced to the commonplace and the tacit. It straddles the two. An uncomfortable position to be in but one that is (presumably) not an accident. And it has advantages.

Surely given the current penchant of the culture for pluralism, for celebrating difference, Christians need to celebrate sameness. We are one human race, with the recognition of one moral law, however tacit and muffled that may sometimes be. We cannot dodge our moral obligations by playing the cultural difference card. It is into this world of objective structures, though fallen and hence warped and bent, that the one Gospel comes. It is the Creator's Gospel. 'For God, who said "Let light shine out of darkness" has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. (2 Cor. 4.6) The Gospel has the same kind of objectivity as the structures of creation do. It is the amazing grace of their Creator. Its claims are held to be true with the same kind of truth, not relative, subjective truth, but objective truth.

Whether men and women hear, or whether they forbear. The same gospel 'is a fragrance of death to death . . . from life to life'. (2 Cor. 2. 16)

Augustine writes about how what he calls divine inward justice is adapted to the different moral customs of different regions and periods, places and times. There is nothing wrong with this, he says. If we don't see this then it is

as if in a house one sees something being touched with the hands by a particular slave, which the waiter who serves the wine cups is not allowed to do; or as if something is allowed to happen behind the stables which is not permitted in the dining room, and a man is indignant on the ground that, though it is one house and one family, the same liberties are not given to all members to do what they please anywhere they like. (*Confessions*, III.7.13)

In the same way, the one eternal gospel is, and is to be, refracted in the various cultures in which it enters.

Someone may say that to stress the idea of commonness is not 'Reformed'. For those who react in this way, doubting that the Reformed faith has, historically speaking, a secure investment in 'the natural', then (apart from reading the New Testament) they may care to consult David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*, (Acton Institute, nd.) and Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics*, (Eerdmans, 2006). And while on the subject of reading, George Mavrodes' little book *Belief in God* (Random House, 1970) is essential for apologetics. But my guess is that you won't find it assigned reading in Reformed or evangelical colleges and seminaries. It ought not to be out of print. And as regards the practice of the early church one of the most insightful things is F.F. Bruce's short book *The Defence of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1959). Bruce shows that Paul and the others present biblical truth, but with different starting points. ' . . . while Jesus remains the same, and the gospel is unchanging, the means adopted to defend the faith may vary widely according to the situation to which the apologist finds himself and the public with which he is confronted.' (11)

These two features—that the faith possesses commonness with nature, and at the same time the element of sharp difference from it—enables it to be presented with integrity both when we are in situations when it is good tactics to stress the samenesses and when it is good tactics to stress the differences. There are occasions for the use of each tactic, though never occasions when we may so stress the differences that we deny the samenesses, or so stress the samenesses that we deny the differences. At times it is good tactics to start from difference, discontinuity. At other times to start from the samenesses, the points of contact.

When we so stress the samenesses that we exclude or muffle the differences, or give the samenesses some kind of general priority over the differences, we become a member of the *evidentialist* family. When we stress the differences and demote the samenesses *presuppositionalist* is our surname. But the suffixes give the game away. In adopting them, we lose the plot. What was adopted as a means to an end has become an end in itself, a dogma, an ideology operating within the Christian thought-world.

WHY THE MISTAKE?

How does it come about that presuppositionalists and evidentialists have formed two rather estranged families? What I think has gone wrong should now be obvious. Apologetics, a practical discipline, has become chiefly (if not wholly) theoretical in character. If the kind reader will allow a philosopher to say so, part of this source of the error has been that the teaching and development of apologetics has typically been in the hands of philosophers, or of the

philosophically-minded, together with a little help from their friends the systematic theologians. These characters all have a stake in *systems*. But, to repeat myself, the last thing that apologetics needs it to be treated as a theoretical system.

Philosophers and systematic theologians certainly have a vital stake in issues of theological method, prolegomena, and theological shape—the *theoretics*, as we might call them. There are relatively permanent ways in which the faith of theologians and philosophers seeks and finds understanding. These are fruits of abiding interest and concern to the church. But to study and to develop such matters in reflective, theoretical fashion, and to hold them as an abiding resource for the church, is altogether different from the *pragmatics* of apologetics, which have to do with day by day presentations of the faith once delivered to the saints. I'd even say that apologetics has as much to do with rhetoric as it has with philosophy. No doubt philosophers, part of whose brief is to be culturally aware, have a part to play in apologetics. But they should not run the business. Apologetics is not a one man show, presented by a solo artist. It is a variety performance, with theologians, historians, sociologists, philosophers, rhetoricians, all showing us their tricks.

So am I a presuppositionalist or an evidentialist? I'm neither. Or both. I hope you are too.