

WITHOUT APOLOGY:
WHY I AM A PRESUPPOSITIONALIST*

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THE work of New York-based process artist Christo has puzzled even the most tolerant viewers. It typically consists of huge projects using nylon sheets that wrap buildings or even landscapes. Some critics regard this not as art, but as one more nihilistic insult to the Western aesthetic temperament. A closer look, however, reveals some interesting features, quite compatible with a Christian sensibility. In 1976 he created *The Running Fence*, an 18-foot-tall white nylon ribbon that stretched for over 24 miles across Sonoma and Marin counties in northern California. It began on one side of Highway 101 and ran into the Pacific Ocean. Driving or walking in the area, one first sees this banner not at one end, but at some point along the way. As the eye follows it up and down the hills, the clear contours emerge, the landscape's hues and shapes suggest themselves. The fence disappears, first here and there, as it is hidden behind a hill, and then altogether, beyond what the eye can see.

Christo (who significantly dropped his last name, Javacheff) has not surprisingly invited reflection about the transcendent by his viewers. These great sheets of fabric are only displayed for a few days or weeks. Human finitude is also impressed on the beholder by contemplating the sheer size of the work produced. While we stand in awe of its dimensions we suddenly become aware of our own limits, and can echo David's words, "What is man that you are mindful of him?" (Ps 8:4) The works also highlight the basic shape of things, their underlying structure. In the same way that Cézanne painted landscapes by stressing their geometric outline, Christo goes directly to the subject and invites the viewer to discover the outline personally.

There is more. Wrapping buildings or coastlines suggests a gift, and reminds one of the way the world in which we live is not our own creation, but comes to us because of God's blessing. Art historian Dominique Laporte sees other connections with the Christian message. The sheets, which are eventually removed, present a shroud syndrome which reminds one of the theme of the resurrection.¹ However much of this aspect of Christo's

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¹ Dominique G. Laporte, *Christo* (New York: Pantheon, 1988) 67.

approach may be intentional, it certainly can have the effect of pointing us to the Creator of the world, who has given it meaning and direction.

Presuppositional apologetics does the same thing, only far more directly and persuasively. Apologetics is the justification of the Christian hope, one we are required to present to those who challenge us. The classical biblical text which gives us this mandate is 1 Pet 3:15, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer [*apologia*] to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." Throughout the history of the church many different schools of apologetics have sought to obey this commandment with more or less success. Some rely on reasoning constructs, seeking to demonstrate the existence of God by force of logic. Others are based on appeals to aesthetics or moral sensibility. Still others attempt to present various historical evidences for the reality of the Christian account.

Presuppositional apologetics is the name given to the approach taken by those who stand in the tradition of Groen Van Prinsterer, Abraham Kuyper, and Cornelius Van Til. The term refers to the concern for basic commitments shared by these Reformed apologists. The approach does not minimize either logic or evidences, but it incorporates them into a framework by which they can make sense. It is regrettable that so much polarization has occurred between various schools, which often caricature each other's positions without doing the careful work of investigation needed in order to take a stand.

Properly understood, presuppositional apologetics is transcendental in its thrust. That is to say, it seeks to do justice to the intellectual and spiritual conditions whereby anything has meaning. Like the works of Christ, it wants to draw our attention to the basic contours of an intellectual and cultural landscape. It affirms the finitude, indeed the sinfulness, of our estate, and the insufficiency of human beings to comprehend the universe. But at the same time it presents God as the great Creator, the giver of life. Only a world whose meaning is defined by Elohim, the living God, makes any sense at all. The challenge of presuppositional apologetics, then, is the challenge addressed to Job so long ago, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand." (Job 38:4)

The heart of presuppositional apologetics is just that: the heart. Because God has revealed himself clearly in the visible things that have been made, and also in the special revelation of Jesus Christ, our hearts, the center of our being, must respond in the love of the truth. The apostle Peter begins his definition of *apologia* by telling us to lift up Christ in our hearts. This is not only a sort of spiritual preface to the hard work of giving answers. It is the only condition which makes apologetics legitimate, the condition of the worshipful heart. It goes together with the "gentleness and respect" he calls for in the same verse. The most consistent apologetic approach is one that begins with worship and ends in humility.

Whatever else one may say about the details of presuppositionalism, this is its core. It begins and ends frankly with authority. Not the blind authority of fideism, mind you, which is a leap of faith that denies reason. On the contrary, beginning with proper biblical authority is the most reasonable move one could make. In other words, concern with presuppositions does not make us shy of careful argumentation. Rather, it enhances and establishes it. Neither reason nor any other part of the created world is neutral, isolated from the total framework for things. Their ultimate meaning is in the God who is *there*, to use Francis Schaeffer's powerful language.

So at one level, asking why I am a presuppositionalist is like asking me why I believe there is a God. He is such a basic part of everything I am that it seems false to pull out various reasons for believing in him. It is something like asking me why I am married to Barbara. I *am* married, very happily so, but what are the reasons? That is a hard question, one of which I rarely take stock, since it is so basic to my identity. Furthermore, even in the first place I did not marry Barbara primarily because of some sort of argument, and whatever intellectual reasons there may have been I have now forgotten. Of course, the analogy breaks down at a crucial point. Unlike marriage to Barbara, I believe presuppositionalism is for everybody. So however difficult it might be, I do want to present some reasons for its virtues. Let me suggest four of them.

1. Presuppositional apologetics accords better with biblical doctrine than other positions. First and foremost, it is the reality of God we want to proclaim. In a way, nothing else really matters. Either "God exists, and . . . rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Heb 11:6), or he does not, and to believe in him is utter folly. Reformed theology has no claims to have arrived at the final formulation of God's nature, but it has consistently attempted to describe his attributes in the most magnifying way. The unity of God, his simplicity, his infinity, his immensity, eternity, and his immutability are set forth alongside his knowledge, his will, his justice, his goodness, love, grace and mercy, his power and dominion. Lest these terms appear to be cold concepts, Protestant theology has also insisted on the personality of God. According to Melancthon and Ursinus, the person is "the individual that subsists, is living, intelligent, is not sustained by another, nor is a part of another."² Van Til often spoke of "three centers of consciousness," or the "ontological trinity," signifying the reality and the tripersonality of God.

The doctrine of the covenant expresses the relation between God and his people in its richest manner. The root notion of covenant theology is the glory of God. This in turn implies the *summum bonum* of our existence, knowing God and communing with him. Geerhardus Vos, Van Til's favorite teacher, is as eloquent as anyone ever has been on the significance of the covenant for human religion.

² Quoted by Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. J. T. Dennison, Jr.; trans. G. M. Giger; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992) 1.255.

To be a Christian is to live one's life not merely in obedience to God, nor merely in dependence on God, nor even merely for the sake of God; it is to stand in conscious, reciprocal fellowship with God, to be identified with Him in thought and purpose and work, to receive from Him and give back to Him in the ceaseless interplay of spiritual forces. . . . According to this the covenant means that God gives Himself to man and man gives himself to God for that full measure of mutual acquaintance and enjoyment of which each side to the relation is capable.³

This means in turn that we are religious creatures. Not that we need ritual or ceremony necessarily, but we do need to depend on God. When we do not, it is not that we cease to be religious, but we turn our faith to another object, whatever that may be. In the words of Bob Dylan's song, "You've got to serve somebody." Presuppositional apologetics, I believe, recognizes the religious core of our natures better than other systems do, because it understands that we are united, and that our dispositional complex, however individual and diverse, is always directed toward a goal, be it the true hope of the gospel or the deceptive promise of the idol.

The issue of authority has already been mentioned. Our religious drive makes us tend toward some kind of final authority. This is why in presuppositional thinking, it is not embarrassing to confess at the outset that we trust in a self-attesting God. Though proof is required in order that responsible commitment can be made, ultimately there is no proof above God by which he must be justified. That is true of unbelief as well, actually. Since no good reason for sin can be found, apostasy is based on the unprovable authority of some standard other than God.

The dynamics of unbelief are crucial to grasp, because even non-Christian people believe in God at some basic level. The argument in Romans 1 and 2 is that although we do know God because he is revealing himself to us, we turn from that knowledge and deny him in so many ways. But nevertheless, even our denial would not be possible were it not for our knowledge. Because of this, we have a point of contact with the unbeliever, despite the great chasm between us. When we face a friend who challenges our faith, we know we have in front of us someone who already knows God! It is important to appeal to that knowledge in the right way, without being naïve as to its foundations. Nevertheless, we can be confident that here before us stands no *tabula rasa*, but God's image-bearer, fleeing what he knows to be true in his heart.

This brings us to another doctrine which accommodates presuppositionalism, the noetic effects of sin. We are not only fallen in our bodies, or our desires. Even our ability to reason has been affected by sin. Because the fall is primarily an ethical tragedy, disobedience characterizes everything we

³ Geerhardus Vos, "Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980) 186.

do, or say, or think. Seeking to persuade others about the truth of the gospel, then, involves more than a few logical demonstrations. It means laying bare the fallacies of unbelief in all its facets.

2. Many other rapprochements could be made between biblical doctrine and the presuppositional approach. But we must move on to other areas. Because of its concern to go to the heart, it is natural for this kind of apologetic to drive inquiry right to the very foundations. Thus presuppositional apologetics is *penetrating*. Two dimensions of this could be mentioned. First, it looks deeply into each trend, each philosophy, each worldview. But second, it also looks broadly into areas beyond ideas.

First, then, our approach seeks to discover what is going on behind the scenes. This does not mean it looks for occult meanings through gnostic techniques. Rather, it involves identifying the driving motives behind a society's trends or a person's lifestyle. This point was brought home to me in a debate I witnessed at college between a liberal theologian and an evangelical law professor. The subject was the resurrection of Christ. The evangelical used the familiar argument from the empty tomb of Christ. He masterfully reviewed the possible theories: the apostles stole the body, the Romans failed to kill him, he was drugged, they mistook the tomb, etc. Each of these was refuted on various grounds, leaving only one theory to be valid: Jesus really was raised from the dead. The response by the liberal was disconcerting. He simply agreed with the evangelical, and complemented him on his eloquence.

The audience was quite disappointed at first, until he added, almost as a parenthesis, that to him whether or not the physical resurrection occurred has no incidence on his faith. Well, then we began to witness a strange turn of events. The more the evangelical said that the resurrection was physical, the more the liberal said he did not care. For him what mattered was the "meaning" of resurrection, the symbolical truth of it, the inspiration it could give, and so on. What was happening here? Quite simply that the evangelical had air-tight arguments that only stayed on the surface. He was not able to see that until the dichotomy between history and faith, physical and spiritual was confronted and refuted, the discussion could go on a long time without getting anywhere.

Anyone who has tried to persuade a Hindu about the Incarnation has run into the same problem. Of course, there is an incarnation of Jesus, our friend might aver, but there are others as well. Again, what needs to be done is probing to the depths. As Psalm 19 puts it, "Who can discern his errors?" The answer of the rest of the Psalm is that the penetrating power of the Word, which radiates like the heat of the sun, from which nothing is hidden, exposes the basic assumptions which are held and control our thoughts and lives.

The concern with depth adds a further advantage to the presuppositional approach: it reckons with the reality of human psychology better than other methods. Rather than treat people as ideas with feet, it considers

the issues of motivation, doubt and certainty, spiritual hunger, and the like, to be as important as the use of logic. As psychologists know, the reasons for unbelief may be quite varied. Take the problem of evil. On the surface, many questions can be raised. How can God allow children to suffer? Why should believers be the only beneficiaries of grace? How could God have made the world, knowing it would fall into evil and death? But beneath the surface other questions lurk. One person may have a genuine problem with a philosophical impasse of a God who is both good and powerful. But another might have been brought up by a hostile father and have nurtured hatred for the God who is mistakenly identified with that father. Still another may have deep-seated fear that the forces of evil are able to overcome the good. As William Willimon expresses it, "The problem is not simply pain, that we feel pain, or that some pain is too much—but that we find so little meaning in some pain. Anguish is the concomitant of meaningless pain. It divides the pain of childbirth from the pain of cancer."⁴

Presuppositional apologetics at its best will know how to sort out the surface and the deeper matters. Furthermore, it will know how to identify the points of tension, where a skeptic, however justified his objections, will have admitted engaging in an ethical manoeuvre to escape God at some level. I say "at its best," because presuppositionalists are not always faithful to what their system requires. It is possible to have all of this methodology well understood and still lack compassion for the lost. Sadly, an apologetic which is supposed to be more centered on God than others can often be practiced in a way that ignores the grace and the love of the God we seek to defend.

Second, our approach is freer than many to explore other realms of experience besides ideas. Os Guinness, in his underrated book *The Grave-digger File*, describes the disastrous effects of ignoring culture and social relations in the treatment of human beings.⁵ The book is cast as a set of memos from a senior spy to his apprentice, on how to subvert the Christian church. One way is to put it to sleep. Calling it "the sandman effect," the master spy says to be sure and keep Christians fighting a battle for the mind, and avoid anything but ideas. That way, only a handful of people will be alerted to the dangers of secularism. What Guinness is pleading for with his biting irony has been understood by the better theologians for centuries. It is that we are more than logical robots. Our thinking and our behavior are as much influenced by the place we grew up, the models we trust, the music we listen to, as by a philosophical argument.

Many studies in social history have shown this to be true. Why did people in the nineteenth century become attracted to Marxism? Not primarily through Marx and Engels' philosophical arguments, which were difficult even for trained people to follow. But because they were hungry, because

⁴ Thomas H. Naylor et al., *The Search for Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 107.

⁵ Os Guinness, *The Grave-digger File* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1983).

the working conditions in London were terrible, and it appeared that the church was not doing much about it. Slogans such as "religion is the opiate of the people" rang true to a working class that felt ill at ease in the Victorian houses of worship.⁶ The point is that the beliefs of the people were held without any real concern for whether the issue was true or false.

Ideas *are* important, but so are the other dimensions of human life. It is in culture that we live and move and have our being. So presuppositional apologetics looks into social trends and life-styles in order to communicate the truth of Christianity in a way that reaches real people in the real world. What areas can be investigated? The seminars presented at the conference give a good idea! World religions, science, the media, therapy, ethnic minorities, and of course philosophy itself are all legitimate arenas where we may engage the forms of unbelief. Popular culture is an important place to examine if we are going to take stock of a large segment of our population. A song about loneliness by R.E.M., a film about an innocent simpleton named Forrest Gump, an investigation by Oprah Winfree into sisters who share the same boyfriend, the baseball strike, a best selling book about "Generation X," these tell us a good deal about the values held by Americans.

Our goal in this research is not just fascination with subjects that are newly acceptable at the university. It is to discern the minds of our fellow human beings, who are lost and confused in the culture of disbelief. Culture is a confusing notion at best. But as increasing work is being done on its dimensions and implications, we have new awareness of the ways in which the world can influence us. Consider this seemingly far-fetched example. As you know, a debate rages over the subject of the postmodern condition. On the one side some affirm that we have moved irretrievably beyond the Enlightenment and its ideals of reason, equality, industry, and progress. As François Lyotard puts it, "'Auschwitz' can be taken as a paradigmatic name for the tragic 'incompletion' of modernity."⁷ On the other side, scholars insist that modernity's roots are so deep that far from abandoning the Enlightenment we have become "ultra-modern," pushing the ideals of reason, equality, industry, and progress to their extreme. Which one is right?

A surprising source gives us the answer. It is the study of fashion. The history of clothing from the mid-nineteenth century to the present helps us discern the deeper commitments of our culture. Authors such as Anne Hollander and Gilles Lipovetsky have studied the history of the way the middle class dresses. At the center, of course, is the gray suit. Hollander shows that on the surface this drab, uniform business attire represents the colder Enlightenment beliefs in thrift, responsibility, and self-control. Also, the possibility of everyone, rich and poor alike, wearing the same clothes

⁶ See Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975). 88-106.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992) 18.

reinforces the ideals of equality and progress, coupled with other democratic principles. At the same time, the suit can be individually tailored, even becoming flattering to the human body because it draws attention to the man wearing it rather than to itself. As a result there are subtle, but powerful ways in which individuality can be expressed and competition fostered.⁸

The suit proves the triumph of the Enlightenment, and the tenacity of modernity. It confirms that both the brighter side, democracy and progress, as well as the darker side, literally, in this case, are very much with us. I don't mean this to be a cheap shot lodged at the advocates of the post-modern condition. But it brings a dimension to the discussion which recognizes the reality of culture and its intimate testimony to who we are and what we think. Presuppositional apologetics has not done much with the cultural dimension, to be sure. But it is uniquely qualified to do so, because of its recognition that we are more than ideas with feet.

3. A third implication of presuppositional apologetics is the freedom it gives to be guided by scriptural principles. Put very simply, we are free to have the Bible tell us what side to take on each issue, rather than having our views dictated ahead of time. There is a good deal of discussion today about the culture wars. Some consider the metaphor dangerous because it puts everyone, including Christians, into a combative mode. I have no such quarrel, since the Bible is replete with fighting words. My problem is rather with the ill effects of the polarization many trend watchers discern. James Davison Hunter's two major books, *Culture Wars* and *Before the Shooting Begins*, have many helpful descriptions of the current battles over abortion, pornography, education, and so on. But the implication is that there are only two sides to choose from: the conservative and the progressive. Hunter claims he can tell us how a person will evaluate various political and moral questions, depending on which camp he might belong to. Furthermore, he places most evangelical Christians in the conservative camp, across the board.

But I believe this is deeply mistaken. As a Christian I do go along with the conservative camp on many issues. But on others I am quite progressive. On most issues, in fact, I am in neither group altogether, but in a third one, which has no particular label. A thoughtful piece appeared recently by James Skillen, Director of the Center for Public Justice in Washington. Entitled "Who's Contract for Welfare Reform?" it described the current welfare program as a powerful symbol of the decline of America.⁹ Government has been incapable of carrying out justice and providing incentives for work. The liberal hope of changing society by means of money and

⁸ Oppressively, Martha C. Nussbaum believes. See her review article, "Looking Good, Being Good," in *The New Republic* 212/1 (Jan. 2, 1995) 33.

⁹ James Skillen, "Who's Contract for Welfare Reform," *Public Justice Report* 18/2 (Mar.-Apr. 1995) 1. Presumably the title was meant to read, "Whose Contract . . ."

congressional action is clearly a myth. Republicans, newly in power, are now claiming that if only big government could be downsized not only would justice be done, but poverty would be reduced considerably.

Skillen says the Republican reply is no more realistic than the liberal ideal. For it basically sets its hope on just doing away with this unwieldy symbol and leaving people to their own devices. But that will no more eliminate crime, poverty, unwed mothers, and drugs than costly programs. Neither government reduction nor government spending will solve America's fundamental problem, which is to become morally accountable within many different centers of responsibility: the family, schools, leisure, the work place, and so on. To be sure, some government reform, preferably modest ones, have their place: "Government must do more than cut off its misguided funding experiments. It must protect, uphold, and secure with justice a manifold society in which people can express their true dignity and honor as creatures serving God and neighbor."¹⁰

This is presuppositional thinking, I believe. We must be free to get past the preassigned roles and find out what Scripture says about each issue. It has become a favorite expression among Christians who want to avoid polarization to seek a "third way." That can be a helpful instinct, but we need to be careful, because even the third way can become a preassigned position! That does not mean the kind of freedom affirmed by Existentialism, which has no rules. What is really needed is the development of a Christian worldview which begins from a commitment to the authority of Scripture, and then looks to interpret all of life under the lordship of the author of Scripture, whose service is perfect freedom.

4. Finally, presuppositional apologetics promotes the art of persuasion with both intellectual rigor and imagination. It is a pity that so much current evangelism is rather prosaic and linear. This stands in contrast to the biblical pattern, where the truth of the divine message is cast in so many different forms. One of Van Til's favorite ways to describe the biblical worldview was, the "Christian story." Indeed, from the word *historia*, a story is an account of the events and facts that are pertinent. This accounting is often done by narrative, but can also be in poetic form, or in parables. We moderns have fallen into the bad habit of dividing between something true and "just a story." But we should rather learn from the street language, "Hey, what's the story here?"

This is more than a plea to use a little narrative, a little poetry in our apologetics. At the heart of the presuppositional approach are the two steps of first getting over onto the opponent's ground in order to discover the impossibility of his position, and second to invite him onto biblical grounds in order to taste and see that the Lord is good. Since people are often not ready to hear a direct version of the message, both steps should involve some

¹⁰ Ibid.

destabilizing. The tellers of biblical times were constantly keeping people off-balance. This is not because they enjoyed manipulation but because the roadblocks caused by sin prevent the most direct approach. Furthermore, the Lord himself came as it were to subvert the human race, and thereby to seek and to save the lost.

The great prophets often used such subversionary tactics. After King David had sinned, committing both adultery and the equivalent of murder, he had numbed his senses, and was comfortably entrenched in his protected position as a potentate with certain rights. Had Nathan the prophet spoken directly of his transgressions he might have found himself ejected from the throne room rather promptly. But, as we know, he told him a story instead. A rich man had many sheep and cattle, and a poor man only one ewe lamb whom he loved. In order to prepare a feast one day for a guest, the rich man simply dispossessed the poor man of his ewe lamb. David's reaction was swift, as it was revealing: he declared the rich man deserving of death, and needing to restore four times what he had taken. And then the verdict: "for he did this thing and had no pity" (2 Sam 12:6).

This is presuppositional apologetics in its Old Testament form! Jesus did the same thing with the rich young ruler. To answer his question about eternal life, he first cited the human commandments from the Decalogue, to which the young man replied, quite sincerely, that he had done these. Then, instead of what he might expect, listing the others, he hit him with the surprise of the requirement to sell everything and follow him. Both Nathan and our Lord were aiming at the most basic level of what motivated their audience. But to get there they made them lean in one direction, until they were off-balance and then were vulnerable to the truth.

Our culture has in many ways sealed itself off from reality. What is most likely to reach its vulnerable side is not prosaic discourse, but the good subversion of the prophetic imagination. I well remember a discussion between Francis Schaeffer and a young woman who was riddled with fears of all kinds. Although a believer, she was convinced that Christianity had no real answers for her anxiety, because of the kind of God she thought the Bible revealed. He could have given a theological discourse on the attributes of God, the goodness of God which is behind his love, and so forth. Instead, he simply said to the young woman, "Do you know that there are thousands of angels in this world, and that there are undoubtedly some in this very room?" She was quite unprepared for this argument and the tears began to well up in her eyes, as Schaeffer then patiently explained that God cared so much about us that he had special invisible messengers assigned to each of us. And then he told her about Jesus Christ, who is far above any angel, and who gave himself for us at great cost to himself.

Presuppositional apologetics should be most conversant with surprise, since the gospel is itself God's everlasting surprise. Sadly, many so-called presuppositionalists are well able to stress the antithesis and aim for the jugular. But they do not know much about the grace of God, which is the

very essence of the Christian story. That's why I am a presuppositionalist: because I believe that in the world we have trouble, but Jesus Christ has overcome the world by the grace of the gospel.

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