

Christian theism, the circular reasoning is problematic because he cannot know that all knowledge is gained by sense experience. The only way that he could know this is if he had experiential knowledge of all that can be known, which even the most arrogant of atheists would hardly want to claim. His second option would be to say that he knows that sense experience is ultimate by some other way, in which case he has undermined his chief contention that truth is discovered by sense experience. Either way, his system is left in shambles.

This is just one example of the weaknesses that are bound to occur any time the unbeliever suppresses the truth and attempts to formulate his own worldview. Because any position other than Christianity is false, every worldview is faulty. It is, therefore, the first task of the apologist to undermine the unbeliever's misplaced confidence.

The second aspect of presuppositional apologetics is directed to the defense of Christianity against the various attacks raised against it. Note, however, that the presuppositionalist does not resort to evidentialist tactics even in the defense of Christianity. He does not assume that the answers of Christianity will ultimately be acceptable to the unbelieving worldview. The believer's responsibility is not to make Christianity acceptable to the unbeliever (which it cannot be, given the unbeliever's hatred of God), but to show that Christianity is consistent with itself.

For example, the most popular and probably the most powerful argument against Christianity is the problem of evil. Although it takes a variety of forms depending on the specific concerns of the unbeliever (say, the seemingly pointless suffering of children or the evils of the Nazi Holocaust), the problem of evil asserts the ultimate incompatibility of a God who is perfectly good and omnipotent with the existence of evil. In other words, given the existence of evil, the unbeliever holds that he has conclusive evidence against the possibility that a wholly good, wholly powerful being exists.

There are two directions to head against this sort of attack. The first and most devastating for the unbeliever is to demonstrate that he has no right to make such charges against Christianity, for his worldview does not give the proper foundations for morality in the first place. Although there is not room here to survey the incredible variety of secular philosophies of ethics, none of them provide a consistent basis for declaring an action wrong. Thus, the relativism espoused by our culture undercuts the unbeliever's own

ability to use the problem of evil. He wants to be able to say that the Holocaust is wrong, but given his own worldview, he is unable to account for its wrongness. If the unbeliever is unable to justify making absolute statements about the morality of an action, he certainly is not justified in criticizing God for allowing instances of "evil."

While undercutting the unbeliever's right to use morality against God as an appropriate response to the problem of evil, it is not really an answer to the charge that the unbeliever raises. Ultimately, the unbeliever is questioning the self-consistency of the Christian faith; he wants to show that Christianity is not compatible with itself and is therefore self-refuting. The responsibility of the apologist, then, is to provide some answer from within the context of Christian theism that at least hints at a solution. One might be tempted at this point to try to explain the existence of suffering and hardship on the basis of the Fall, and at some level this is correct. Suffering does exist because of evil and the Fall, and even the horrendous suffering of the Holocaust or the suffering of seemingly innocent infants is not incompatible with the justice of God. All men deserve suffering; it is only by grace that we do not suffer the pains of eternal punishment immediately. However, even this answer is insufficient in that the unbeliever can merely question the reasons for the Fall itself. At this point, the biblical answer is found in the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. The answer is beyond us, but this does not undermine our apologetic. Rather it reinforces it. If Christians could explain God and his works exhaustively, God would not be the God of Christianity. Because God is infinite, we should expect a degree of mystery in our understanding of his person and works. Notice that this is perfectly consistent with Christianity.

But does it work as an apologetic? Van Til was asked the very same question about his system, and his reply is as valuable today: "Then, if the Spirit opens their eyes, they will see the truth."

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Putting Theology Back in the Pew

July, 2004

How to Get the Most out of a Sermon

Brad Anderson

Mortimer Adler wrote an influential book called *How to Read a Book*. Odd title—how could one read that book if he didn't know how to read a book? Adler's book focuses on what questions to ask and what to look for as you read, how to analyze the author's arguments, and how to mark up the book for later use. Millions have found Adler's book very helpful.

As Christians, we should be asking a similar question: What can we do to make a sermon more personally meaningful?

Prior to the sermon: prepare yourself. Most people think that a sermon begins when the speaker opens his mouth to start preaching. But getting the most out of a sermon starts prior to the message.

During the week: The more we personally worship the Lord during the week (in Bible study, prayer, song, righteous living, etc.), the more prepared we will be corporately to worship him on Sunday. If church services are the only time you spend in worship, you'll likely not get much from the message.

Pray for the speaker throughout the week, asking for God to help him prepare and preach the appropriate messages. When we pray thus, it creates within us an expectancy and anticipation that God may use the message to minister directly to us. Congregations often get what they pray for in this regard.

Saturday night: Don't stay out so late on Saturday night that you can't function on Sunday morning. Get to bed early enough to get a good night's sleep. Have Sunday morning planned out beforehand (clothing, breakfast, travel plans, etc.). Begin thinking about and planning for the Lord's Day the night before.

Here's an Idea: Plan a special "Lord's Day Eve" meal and family time on Saturday night to prepare for Sunday. Include Scripture reading

and prayer after the meal with a focus on teaching the children different aspects of church life. Take time to get everything ready to go for Sunday morning. Create anticipation and excitement within your family for the Lord's Day.

Sunday morning: First, spend time in personal worship at home (Bible reading and prayer) before leaving for church. Ask God to prepare your own heart for worship and to bless the worship service, especially the preaching.

Second, it may be wise to eat only a light breakfast to prevent lethargy.

Third, allow plenty of time to get ready, and get to church early. Plan to arrive at least ten minutes prior to the beginning of the service.

Listening to a sermon requires a prepared soul, an alert mind, an open Bible, and a receptive heart.

Fourth, here are some things that you can do at church prior to the service:

- Greet others warmly. Look for visitors or new people to meet and greet.
- Look over the bulletin. Read through the Scripture text and/or outline if given.
- Think about the purpose of the service – to bring honor and glory to God, to worship, to receive encouragement, to be challenged and to be taught.
- Think about God's perfect character and attributes – wisdom, power, glory, grace, mercy, etc.
- Spend time in silent contemplation. Prepare your heart for the service to follow.
- Try to anticipate and eliminate distractions both with yourself and

with your family members. Prepare yourself to pay attention.

- Humble yourself before the Lord by confessing sin. Thank God for his mercy toward you and his invitation for you to come boldly before the throne of grace. Ask God to help the speaker communicate clearly and to help you understand and apply the message.
- Think about how God might use you to encourage or challenge someone else.

Remember that the speaker has put a lot of time and effort into his message with the express purpose of helping and exhorting the audience. Show that you appreciate and value his efforts by remaining alert and showing that you are interested.

During the sermon:

Try to listen carefully. Good preaching appeals first to the mind, so your mind must be fully engaged. Being attentive requires self-discipline. Our minds tend to wander and daydream, but listening to the message is a part of the worship we offer to God. It's a prime opportunity for us to hear what God is teaching us. Don't insult the speaker (or God) by daydreaming, tuning out, or snoozing during the message.

Maintain eye contact with the speaker. This gives you something to focus on and gives the speaker the impression that you are listening.

Turn to the appropriate passages in the Bible and read along silently. It's beneficial to see the biblical text the message is coming from so you can evaluate what the speaker is saying (cf. Acts 17:11). The rustling of pages is one extra sound most pastors enjoy hearing during their messages.

Respond positively with nonverbal cues – smile, laugh, nod your head, say "Amen."

Take notes or follow the outline if one is provided. Write your own outline and see how it compares to the published one. Taking notes is an excellent way to stay focussed during the message.

Think about how to respond personally to the message (c.f., James 1:22). Good preaching always applies the Bible to daily life.

- What sins must I confess and forsake?
- What duties must I fulfill? What commands must I obey?
- What comforts and promises can I count on?
- How does this message encourage or challenge me?
- How must I change my attitudes and/or behaviors?

From the Westminster Confession:

It is required of these that hear the Word preached that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness and readiness of mind; meditate upon it; hide it in their hearts; and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

Review after the service.

- Talk to the speaker about your impression of the sermon, either good or bad.
- Quiz family members or friends about the main points of the sermon.
- Discuss the purpose of the sermon and how one should respond to it.
- Discuss anything about the sermon that was confusing or hard to understand.
- Discuss the other parts of the service – music, prayer, etc.
- Avoid being overly critical of the "performance" of the preacher. Focus instead on the content of the message.

Note this quote:

Something important happens when we hear a good sermon: God speaks to us. Through the inward ministry of the Holy Spirit, He uses His Word to calm our fears, comfort our sorrows, disturb our consciences, expose our sins, proclaim His grace, and reassure us in the faith. But these are all affairs of the heart, not just matters of the mind, so listening to a sermon can never be a merely intellectual exercise. We need to receive Biblical truth in our hearts, allowing what God says to influence what we love, what we desire and what we praise (Philip G. Ryken, "Tuning In" *Tabletalk* (Ligonier Ministries), March 2003, pp. 14-16).

Listening to a sermon requires a prepared soul, an alert mind, an open Bible, and a receptive heart. But the best way to tell if we are listening is by the way we live.

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Defending Your Faith, Part 2

Michael P. Riley

In the previous issue of *Sola*, I attempted to outline the problems that arise when believers try to defend Christianity from a perspective of neutrality. Such an evidentialist approach to apologetics, we found, is inadequate both logically and theologically. Logically, the evidentialist's evidences and arguments are insufficient to prove the truth of Christian theism. Even the common theistic proofs, such as the arguments from creation and design, reveal under closer scrutiny that they are tremendously flawed. Theologically, the idea that one can be neutral about the existence of God is extraordinarily problematic. Neutrality is incompatible with our conception of God; to speak of a god who might exist or who possibly exists is to speak of a god other than that of Christianity because the Christian God exists necessarily. Furthermore, the strategy of finding neutral ground between the believer and the unbeliever also misrepresents the doctrine of total depravity. The unbeliever is not neutral; rather, he hates God and is always attempting to suppress the truth in his unrighteousness. To make any progress in the field of apologetics, therefore, we must abandon the evidential approach.

If the Spirit opens the unbeliever's eyes, they will see the truth.

Contrary to such a hopelessly deficient method of defending the faith stands the presuppositional approach to apologetics, pioneered by Cornelius Van Til, an original faculty member of Westminster Theological Seminary. Van Til recognized that given a fully Christian theology, it is impossible for a Christian to do the apologetic task from the perspective of unbelief. What Van Til argued is at the heart of presuppositionalism: Christianity is a unified system of truth, and it is impossible to defend one aspect of that system without taking for granted the truth of the rest of the system. Thus, one cannot cogently defend the truth of certain parts of Christianity while consistently attempting to be neutral on others. The degree to which we are neutral in our apologetic for the faith is the degree to which we compromise the very faith that we wish to defend. Furthermore, the

degree to which we compromise Christianity is the degree to which we forsake the right to use logic and reasoning, for without Christianity, logic has no justification.

Some might find the preceding paragraph troubling because it seems that there is then no defense for the faith that can be presented to an unbelieving and antagonistic world. If one must assume the truth of Christianity in order to prove Christianity, it certainly seems that Christians are left using circular arguments. Surprisingly, Van Til would plead guilty to the charge of circular argumentation; however, Van Til correctly observed that every worldview is ultimately circular. That is, every person has certain presuppositions that lie at the heart of his thinking. These presuppositions are non-negotiable; all evidence is made to conform to the presuppositions. The power of Van Til's system, however, is that if Christianity is indeed true, every other system of thinking must, by definition, be false. Thus, the Christian "circle" will be correct, and every other circle will be inadequate to explain some aspect of man or the universe about him. It is the task of the apologist to discover these flaws in the unbeliever's thinking, expose them, and destroy the very foundations of the unbelieving worldview. Presuppositionalism does not seek to build a case for Christianity on the foundations of unbelief; rather, it attempts to undermine the unbeliever's worldview and demonstrate that Christianity is the only viable worldview that accounts for reason and morality and every other aspect of existence.

Practically, a presuppositional apologetic has two distinct facets. First, the believer attempts to undermine the unbeliever's worldview, and second, he presents Christianity as the only possible correct view. The destructive aspect of presuppositional apologetics is probably the most compelling. Because Christianity is true and unbelief is false, every unbelieving worldview will eventually collapse on itself.

For example, suppose that you are talking with a hardened atheist. He contends that he only believes what he can test empirically with his senses. The ultimate reference point that lies back of his worldview is limited to sense experience. His position, however, is hopelessly problematic. Suppose that you ask him how he knows that knowledge only comes by means of sense experience. He has one of two options. He could argue that he knows that particular truth on the basis of sense experience, in which case his argument is circular. However, unlike the circularity of