

A Critique of "Classical Apologetics"

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Classical Apologetics, by R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1984, 364 pp., \$12.95 (paper). Reviewed by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen, pastor, Covenant Community Church (OPC), Placentia, Calif. and Dean of the Newport Graduate School.

Intellectual respect for Biblically-defined Christian faith is not prevalent in this age. For that reason alone Reformed Christians should readily welcome any honest effort to clarify and strengthen our method of defending the faith, as this book aims to do. We need each other's help in more faithfully practicing the common task of defending the Word of our common Lord.

All three authors of this particular effort in apologetics are associated with the Ligonier Valley Study Center. They do not indicate who wrote which sections of the book. Each author advocates Reformed Christianity, and that perks our interest in their opinions on apologetical method. Since that issue is so tied to heavy questions in the theory of knowledge, however, it is also relevant that none of the authors has an advanced degree in philosophy (and only Gerstner has an earned doctorate at all - in church history).

The authors should be enthusiastically applauded for insisting that Christian faith is capable of a reasoned defense. They will not compromise an inch with the destructive idea that heartfelt faith is without intellectual reasons - or the idea that to be irrational is a religious virtue. They maintain that God commands believers to reason with unbelievers, not simply proclaim that they must make a groundless, subjective choice. This is a sorely needed emphasis today. We could not agree with it more. On their chosen *method* of reasoning in defense of Christianity, though, we must agree much less. We must find it, actually, contrary to good reasoning.

About half of the text of *Classical Apologetics* is given to promoting and practicing natural theology, and about half is given to opposing the presuppositional method as found specifically in Cornelius Van Til's apologetic. As the book's subtitle indicates, it purports to be "A Rational

Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics." In the end it succeeds at neither.

The book opens by identifying the object of its apologetical concern: namely, "The Crisis of Secularism" (chap. 1). The central axiom of secularism - and key challenge to Christianity in our day - is the view that "All possible knowledge is restricted to the temporal" (p. 7). The book's primary, self-defined task is, therefore, to refute that view. But it does nothing like that. In fact, the question is not even raised again in this form.

The authors rather try to deal with it by proving the existence of "God." But given secularism's axiom, this is futile. The only things we can know - and hence prove - are temporal in character. Accordingly, even if the authors prove the existence of some "first cause" (which we call "God"), it will necessarily be part of the temporal order of nature! In short, without analyzing and refuting the presupposition of secularism about what is knowable, the authors simply *beg the question* they set out to answer.

Beyond this, there is more than a little philosophical confusion in the authors' conception and method of proving God's existence. For instance, to evade the charge of naturalism and the idea that man has an unaided intrinsic ability to reach a knowledge of God, they hold that "natural theology" (the human activity of devising proofs for God's existence) is reflection "dependent upon divine revelation" (p. 25). But since a "*divine* revelation" already assumes the existence of God, the "natural theology" of our authors depends at the outset on what it is supposed to prove at its conclusion! The "natural man" using his "natural reason" - for whom the proofs of natural theology are intended - does not look upon the facts of nature as a "divine revelation" at all.

When the authors go on and try to demonstrate that the Bible itself endorses "natural theology," they are unable to do so, for all the evidence they adduce pertains rather to "natural *revelation*." The Psalmist and Paul say absolutely nothing about inferences and proofs devised by human reflection. Our authors seem not to be aware that they ambiguously switch back and forth between the two concepts of natural revelation and natural theology. (If space permitted, we might show how their portrayal of natural "theology" is conceptually unclear to begin with, especially the notion of inferential reflection upon evidences which is not a complex theoretical reasoning process: pp. 44, 46.)

A concept which has somewhere been *lost* by our authors is that of man's total depravity, including the noetic effects of sin. They tell us that rational apologetics as "pre-evangelism" can establish

the cognitive clarification of Christianity and bring the natural man to an intellectual assent, but to take him *beyond that* to a personal trust in the heart, emotions, and will is solely the work of the Holy Spirit (pp. 21-22). Scripture teaches otherwise. The problem with fallen men is not simply in their will and emotions. They have just as much "become vain in their reasoning" like fools (Rom. 1:21-22). Will such "natural men" use their "natural reason" to receive the things of the Spirit? They *cannot* (1 Cor. 2:14). In terms of reasoning from nature to God, Paul said this about the natural man: "There is none that understands; there is none that seeks after God" (Rom. 3:11). The work of the Holy Spirit is just as much needed to bring *intellectual* assent as it is to produce emotional trust. By suggesting otherwise, our author's conception of apologetics is untrue to their Reformed theology.

Their book on apologetics is flawed by a number of *philosophical* lapses as well. When positions taken by philosophers are represented in the book, they are too often oversimplified, jumbled, or handled with little more than slogans (rather than analysis). Their discussion of the (allegedly) "non-negotiable" and "virtually universal" assumptions about logic, perception, and causality in the knowing process (pp. 77ff.) is painfully naive, interacting with none of the modern epistemological problems surrounding empiricism, induction, or the foundations of science and logic. For instance, the causal principle is "defended" against the stringent critique of Hume by replying that it is *true by definition* (p. 83)! (Instead of asking whether every "event" has a cause, they merely assure us that "every *effect* has a cause" is analytical.) This does not give the reader confidence in the book's philosophical discernment.

But for our purposes here, let us single out for examination our authors' cosmological proof of God's existence according to the "traditional" method of "natural theology." They reason: "if something exists now, something exists necessarily" - "something must have the power of being within itself" (pp. 115, 118). This line of thinking is logically fallacious. It does not follow at all from "X exists" that "It is necessarily true that X exists" (or that "X exists necessarily"). The reasoning is also unintelligible. Exactly *what* is "the power of being"?

We get closer to understanding what the authors are trying to argue when they claim anything that exists must have a "sufficient reason" (p. 115). The problem is that this interpretation of their cosmological argument contradicts an earlier statement of theirs: "we say not that everything has an antecedent cause but that every *effect* has an antecedent cause" (p. 111). After all, as we saw above, the causal principle is simply a definitional truth! The critical question, therefore, is *whether* anything that exists (or any event) is "an effect" or not! There is not force to an argument that "God" is the "first cause" (or "sufficient reason") for the world, *unless one first proves* that the world is an "effect."

Why shouldn't the unbeliever simply take the world as uncaused? After all, the "god" of the cosmological argument does not need an antecedent cause; why not simply say the same of the world itself. And even if the things or events in this world are all "effects" (how would one prove that?), why couldn't there be an infinite regress of purely *natural* causes? After all, our experience of causation is limited to the natural world, so how can we extrapolate beyond natural experience? The authors have no philosophically adequate answer and become a study in arbitrariness.

The authors claim that an uncaused molecule could not be contingent, but must exist necessarily and eternally (p. 119). But why? This is sheer prejudice, not argument. If a molecule appears randomly and without cause ("by chance"), there is nothing in such an event *itself* which demands that the molecule necessarily appear, or that the molecule never cease to exist.

On the other hand, if the molecule is thought of as part of an infinite series of contingent causes, our authors commit an elementary logical fallacy by concluding that *the chain* of causes itself must also be contingent - and thus in need of a cause: "nowhere is there to be found the power of being within the causal chain" (p. 120). However, logicians realize that a property of something's individual parts is not necessarily a property of the whole. For instance, imagine a 20-foot replica of the Statue of Liberty made out of plastic legos. The parts all have the property of weighing less than an ounce. If I argue that, therefore, the whole Statue must weigh less than an ounce, my reasoning would be readily dismissed as not worthy of serious attention. To argue that the parts of the world (the causal chain) are contingent, and therefore the world itself is contingent (in need of a causal explanation), deserves no better response.

In the last half of the book, our authors turn to a critique of the presuppositional apologetic, especially as advanced by Cornelius Van Til. Little of this discussion proves helpful or even relevant, however, because Van Til's presuppositionalism is so badly misrepresented. Let me illustrate. According to the authors, Van Til is a "fideist" and, as such, holds that God cannot be known through nature and theistic proof, but only by faith - a faith independent of all rational evidence (p. 27, 34, 35, 185). But Van Til himself has explicitly criticized "fideism" for asking people to believe in their hearts what they allow to be intellectually indefensible (*Christian-Theistic Evidences*, pl. 37). He has taught that "There is objective evidence in abundance.... If the theistic proof is constructed as it ought to be constructed, it is objectively valid, whatever the attitude of those to whom it come may be" (*Common Grace*, p. 49). He refuses to follow Kuyper's view of the uselessness of reasoning with the natural man (*Defense of the Faith*, 1st ed., p. 363). He has said "I do not reject the theistic proofs," "historical apologetics is absolutely necessary and indispensable," and "Christianity is the only reasonable position to hold" (*Defense of the Faith*, p. 256; *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 146; *Common Grace*, p. 62).

Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley have simply not taken the time to understand correctly what they have chosen to criticize. They acknowledge that Van Til denies that his presuppositionalism is fideistic, but they claim to know better (p. 184). Indeed, the last chapters of the book go to great lengths to explain away all of the clear evidence that can be found in the writings of Van Til, Frame, Notaro and Bahnsen which is contrary to their fideistic misrepresentation of presuppositionalism. I am reminded that on the morning in 1977 after I publicly debated Sproul on apologetical method, I read to him numerous quotations from Van Til in support of theistic proof, evidences, and rational argumentation with the unregenerate. He was shocked to hear that Van Til had written such things. I am shocked that, having heard, he continues to force the good professor into the mold of his preconceptions. This is unreasonable - making a presupposition ride roughshod over the evidence!

The authors are quite harsh about Van Til's presuppositionalism. "The implications of presuppositionalism, in our opinion, undermine the Christian religion implicitly" (p. 184). They end their book by ridiculing it: "The emperor of the Land of Presuppositionalism where Van Til, Frame, Clar, Henry, and others live, has no clothes. Van Til is embarrassed" (p. 338). In fact, it should be the authors of this uncharitable and false representation who should be embarrassed. Anyone can knock down a straw man.

For this reviewer, the authors have not begun to interact meaningfully with presuppositionalism. They do not seem to understand it any better than we found them to understand the philosophical issues in constructing a theistic proof according to traditional natural theology. In contrast to their weak effort, as well as in contrast to their misconstrual of Van Til, presuppositional apologetics sets forth the intellectual challenge to all unbelief that "unless [Christianity's] truth is presupposed there is no possibility of proving anything at all" (*Jerusalem and Athens*, p. 21). This is the furthest thing from fideism. It is actually very Pauline (1 Cor. 1:20).

We rejoice that Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley stand with us in worshiping the Triune God. Their effort to defend our common faith means well. But apologetics cannot be evaluated simply like an awkward Christmas gift received from a child. It is *not* simply "the thought that counts" here. The stakes are simply too high. College students cannot expect to respond to skeptical challenges with the kind of thinking found in this book and not suffer intellectual embarrassment. The argumentation is too easy to discredit, totally apart from personal antipathy to Christianity.

The authors admit that their traditional apologetic "is sick and ailing" (p. 12). Judging from the case made in this book, the diagnosis may be overly optimistic. We need not despair for a rational defense of the historic Christian faith, however, if we but listen to the epistemological and theological lessons of presuppositionalism.

Finally though, should you purchase a copy of this book? If your interest is the actual *practice* of defending the faith, you will be disappointed because reliable, logically sound guidance will not be found here. Even if our interest is the intramural, specialized study of apologetical *methods*, you can find more adequate examples of what this book attempts to do. And if you are interested in understanding or criticizing contemporary presuppositional apologetics, save your money for another day.