

Sample Questions for Presbytery Apologetics Exam

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

The following are meant to be representative of the type and scope of questions in apologetics which candidates in the Presbytery of Southern California may expect to be asked. They are only a "sample" (and by only one member of the Credentials Committee). The exam will certainly not include all of these questions, but neither will it be restricted to them.

Candidates are not expected to have been philosophy majors to answer these questions adequately, but we do look for (1) a reliable and general grasp of the history of Western thought (including basic philosophical vocabulary, issues, and figures), (2) an understanding of the proper method for defending the Christian faith, (3) thoughtful answers to particular challenges mounted against Christianity, and (4) an ability to address the intellectual challenge of Christian faith to our modern culture. Your answers will be evaluated in terms of your ministry in a pastoral (not professorial) setting.

A selective bibliography of helpful works appears at the end of the questions. If I can answer any questions for you, feel free to call me.

The Nature of Apologetics

1. What place does apologetics have in a pastor's ministry?
2. What does the term "apologetics" mean?
3. What is the aim or purpose of apologetics?
4. Why is apologetics necessary?
5. What is the Biblical warrant for apologetics?
6. Is there Biblical justification for requiring of candidates for the ministry advanced knowledge and ability in apologetics? (What is it?)
7. With what areas should a pastor be familiar in order to carry on an effective apologetic?
8. "My ministry is not going to be directed to intellectuals, so I do not need training in critical analysis, schools of philosophy, etc." Reply.
9. What is the difference between apologetics, theology, and Christian philosophy?

10. "Apologetics is pre-evangelism." Evaluate.
11. How would you distinguish apologetics from evangelism?
12. Is apologetics defensive or offensive in character?
13. How does apologetics relate to preaching?

Biblical and Theological Foundations for Apologetics

14. Discuss three New Testament texts which directly bear on the theory and practice of apologetics. (Your choice of texts will be significant in itself.)
15. Summarize the apologetical approach taken by the Apostle Paul to the Areopagus in Athens.
16. What part did Paul's reference to "an unknown god" play in his defense of Christianity?
17. What part did Paul's allusion to pagan philosophical poets play in his defense of Christianity?
18. According to Romans 1-2, how do all men know God, and how well do they know God?
19. What is meant by "suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18)? What is apologetically significant about it?
20. Analyze the expression "gnontes ton theon", (Romans 1:21) and draw apologetical applications from it.
21. Offer a Biblical description of the antithesis between the Christian and non-Christian minds.
22. Are unbelievers open-minded and without prejudice, according to Scripture? Should they be treated as though they were?
23. "God's revelation is inescapable." Prove this and show its apologetical significance.
24. Briefly describe the Biblical conception of "knowing God."
25. The Bible seems to teach both that unbelievers know God, yet that they do not know God. Discuss how this can be.
26. Discuss the differences between the believer's and the unbeliever's knowledge of God.
27. Briefly describe the Biblical conception of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. What implications does it have for the use of our intellects?
28. Offer a Biblical rebuke to any Christian attempt to gain presuppositionless neutrality.
29. "God's word is the ultimate starting point." Prove this and show its bearing on apologetical procedure.
30. What place and function did appeals to the resurrection of Jesus Christ have in the proclamation and defense of the early church (for instance, the speeches in Acts)?
31. How was the resurrection to be defended according to New Testament accounts? (Pay attention to the roles of Scripture and eyewitness testimony in particular.)

32. According to the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1.1), what makes natural revelation insufficient? What further makes a written Scripture necessary?
33. According to the *Westminster Confession* (1.4), upon what does the authority of Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed and obeyed, depend? Upon what does it not depend?
34. What "evidences" are presented in the Confession (1.5) for taking the Bible to be the Word of God?
35. Explain the expression following the list of these evidences in the Confession: "yet notwithstanding, our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts."
36. In the above statement, what is the significance of the words "yet not withstanding," "full persuasion," "by and with the Word"?
37. What is meant by the self-attestation of Scripture?
38. Is self-attestation the same as circular reasoning? Is it a valid line of reasoning to appeal to it?
39. Relate the Biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty to the task of apologetics.
40. What part does the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit have in apologetics?
41. Does the necessity of the Holy Spirit's work in the heart of the unbeliever imply that argumentation is not needed? (perhaps mere Bible recitation would be adequate?)
42. Does the Holy Spirit take weak and fallacious arguments and subjectively transform them into strong and valid ones?
43. According to the Bible, what is the nature of saving faith? How does this affect our apologetical method?

History and Problems of Philosophy

44. What is meant by these terms: epistemology, rationalism, empiricism, scepticism, mysticism, phenomenism?
45. What is meant by these terms: metaphysics, existence, essence, universal, particular, contingent, determinism, monism, dualism?
46. What is meant by these terms: logic, truth, validity, soundness, fallacy, informal fallacies, formal fallacies?
47. Contrast the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle.
48. What attitudes toward life were taken by the ancient Stoics, Cynics, Sophists, and Epicureans?
49. Name three important figures from the Patristic period, then from the Scholastic period.
50. What were two key issues discussed in the Patristic period? In the Scholastic period?
51. Assess the influence of neo-platonism on Patristic thinking.
52. Assess the Influence of Aristotelianism on later Scholasticism.

53. Compare and contrast the philosophies of Augustine and Aquinas.
54. What was distinctive about Renaissance philosophy? (In its self-conception, then in actuality)
55. Contrast the philosophies of Descartes and Locke.
56. What views of God were taken by Spinoza, Leibniz, Berkeley?
57. Describe the influence of David Hume's thinking on the subsequent history of Western thought.
58. Assess the opinion that modern philosophy has eventually been given over to irrationalism. How is this accurate? Inaccurate? Would the antidote be a return to the Greeks?
59. In what ways could it be said that Kant's philosophy is the cross-roads or turning-point in modern philosophy?
60. "Kant saved science and made room for faith." Discuss.
61. Summarize a few of the fundamental points in Hegel's philosophy.
62. How do Hegel's and Kierkegaard's ways of doing philosophy stand sharply opposed to each other?
63. What were some of the radical features in the philosophical outlook of Nietzsche?
64. Offer a Christian critique of Marxism (both its theory and its practice).
65. Characterize the following philosophical schools or ideas: realism, idealism, nominalism, conceptualism, atomism, materialism, dialectical view of history, voluntarism, romanticism, naturalism, teleologism, relativism, utilitarianism, nihilism, positivism, evolutionary view of man, vitalism, humanism.
66. What views of God were advanced by the following: Comte, Mill, Hegel, Nietzsche, Bergson, Schleiermacher, Rudolf Otto, William James, Josiah Royce, B. P. Bowne, A. J. Ayer.
67. Generally describe the dichotomizing of facts and values in the last two-hundred years of philosophy.
68. Describe the key ideas and significance of three twentieth-century schools of philosophy.
69. Discuss the relationship of metaphysics to epistemology (methodism).
70. Discuss the relationship of metaphysics to ethics.
71. What is the mind-body problem? Mention some answers which have been offered.
72. What is the philosophical problem of freedom and determinism? Mention some answers which have been offered.
73. What is the problem of induction? Mention some modern attempts to deal with it.
74. What place does logic have in Christian thinking?
75. Mention five or six informal fallacies and illustrate them.
76. Describe the pattern of argument involved in: *modus ponens* (affirming the antecedent), *modus tollens* (denying the consequent), disjunctive syllogism.

77. Name three philosophers known for: (a) scepticism or nihilism, (b) empiricism, (c) rationalist epistemology.
78. Offer a Christian critique of secular rationalism.
79. Offer a Christian critique of secular empiricism.
80. Offer a Christian critique of logical positivism.
81. What is linguistic analysis? Is it a friend or foe of Christianity?
82. How are our beliefs to be justified? Discuss the different approaches to this issue taken by pragmatism, foundationalism, transcendental reasoning.
83. Discuss the actual nature of scientific reasoning. What sets it apart from other kinds of reasoning? Is it objective and invariable? What misleading myths are often entertained about it?
84. What has been the key question in twentieth-century metaethics? Mention some of the answers which have been offered.
85. Offer a Christian critique of non-cognitivism.
86. What views of social authority are proposed by natural-law theory, social contract theory, utilitarianism, traditionalism, anarchism?
87. Offer a Christian critique of the following: hedonism, ethical egoism, existentialism, cultural relativism, Freudianism, behaviorism.
88. Why is it that conflicting schools of philosophy seem utterly unable to resolve their fundamental differences?

Method of Apologetics: schools and issues

89. Briefly describe the distinctive features of the apologetics advanced by the following: Justin Martyr, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Duns Scots, Pascal, Paley, Butler, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Newman, Orr, Brunner, C. S. Lewis.
90. What does Van Til find unacceptable in Thomistic apologetics?
91. What does Van Til find unacceptable in Butler's apologetics?
92. What is meant by "natural theology"? Offer a critique of some of its distinctive features.
93. Describe the traditional theistic proofs.
94. Offer a rebuttal to the cosmological argument.
95. What kind of argument for theism is offered today by Plantinga? By Mavrodes?
96. What is meant by "fideism"? What is wrong with it?
97. Describe the basic features of the "old Princeton" apologetic. Name a couple of recent adherents to this method.

98. Discuss the relationship between Scottish common-sense realism and the old Princeton approach to Christian thinking.
99. What does Van Til find deficient in the old Princeton approach?
100. What relationship did Van Til's apologetic have to Machen's defense of Christianity?
101. Summarize the historical argument for Christ's resurrection. How would an astute unbeliever find this reasoning flawed?
102. From a Biblical vantage point, what is wrong with making historical evidences the crux of your apologetical approach?
103. Summarize the dispute between Warfield and Kuiper over apologetics. In what ways did Van Til agree and disagree with each of them in this controversy?
104. According to Van Til, what is weak and mistaken about the defense of Christianity offered by modern evangelicals?
105. According to Van Til, what is weak and mistaken about the defense of religious faith offered by modern non-evangelical theologians?
106. "An adequate test for truth is the methodological prerequisite for establishing theism." Evaluate.
107. "Jesus Christ is worthy of our faith because both his person and his doctrine are rationally continuous with the values which we have already accepted in ordinary experience." Evaluate.
108. "Whoever wants to find fault with Scripture will assuredly meet with no difficulty in his labor. But is this the course prudence dictates? Is not a rational man satisfied with that system which is attended by the fewest difficulties?" Respond.
109. Tasting Christ is but another instance of pudding tasting. While the chef may show that the pudding is able to assuage the hunger of the body, the final proof is in the actual taste; and each man must do this for himself. Thus with Christianity: Are its premises able to satisfy the whole man? Is Christianity nourishing and clean? If it is not, then a rational man ought to pass it by in favor of a more satisfying option. Evaluate.
110. James Orr once wrote: "Proof in theism consists in showing that God's existence is itself the first postulate of reason - the ultimate basis on which all other knowledge, all other belief rests." How would Van Til respond?
111. Distinguish Van Til's apologetic from that of Clark, Schaeffer, and Carnell.
112. How would John Warwick Montgomery (and others) criticize the apologetic of Gordon Clark?
113. How would Gordon Clark (and others) criticize the apologetic of John Warwick Montgomery?
114. How would Van Til criticize both Montgomery and Clark?
115. Briefly describe the philosophical outlook of Dooyeweerd, paying attention to what might be especially commendable in its project.
116. How do the approaches of Van Til and Dooyeweerd parallel each other? Conflict with each other?
117. Criticize three features of Dooyeweerd's philosophy, especially as it bears upon Christian theology and apologetics.

118. What are some of the approaches which have been taken in answering the non-falsifiability challenge to Christianity's meaningfulness?
119. How does the cultural analysis offered by Schaeffer or Os Guinness fit into a presuppositional apologetic?
120. How was Schaeffer's apologetic less than consistent as a presuppositional challenge?
121. Describe some of the published criticisms of presuppositionalism. What answers would you offer?
122. In what ways do you find presuppositionalism in need of improvement?
123. Describe what you see as popular or significant items in the apologetics of modern evangelicalism. (Perhaps report on three recent books.)

Presuppositionalism in Apologetics

124. What is meant by a "presupposition"? (How does it differ from an axiom?)
125. Explain the significance of the "Creator-creature distinction" for Christian apologetics.
126. What is the relation between authority and reason, according to Van Til?
127. What assessment is made of the unbeliever in presuppositionalism which affects the apologetical approach taken to him?
128. What does Van Til mean by the "autonomous" man?
129. Offer a critique of man's pretended autonomy.
130. What does Van Til mean by the "rationalism-irrationalism tension" in unbelieving thinking? Illustrate it.
131. What is wrong with attempting to be neutral in your argumentation with the non-Christian?
132. Does a presuppositional apologetic reduce to prejudice? Explain your answer.
133. Does Van Til endorse "circular reasoning" in apologetics? Explain.
134. Can anyone argue for his ultimate presupposition without presupposing it? Is everyone stuck with circular reasoning then?
135. How do the "noetic effects of sin" bear upon the issue of apologetical method?
136. Van Til has been said to lay critical stress upon the "antithesis" between believer and unbeliever. How so?
137. In what way is the unbeliever's thinking antithetical to the Christian's? What then becomes of "borrowed capital"?
138. How does Van Til understand the bearing of "common grace" upon the task of apologetics? How does it affect the question of "common ground"?
139. Do Christians have different laws of logic from non-Christians?

140. Given their radically different presuppositions, how can believers and unbelievers communicate (or intellectually cooperate) with each other?
141. Why should we think there is any value in reasoning with unbelievers, according to Van Til?
142. What is our "point of contact" with the unbeliever?
143. What is meant by a "brute fact"? What view does Van Til take of brute facts?
144. Would a presuppositionalist ever use empirical evidence (say, from history) in his defense of the faith? Explain, relating your answer to the question of neutrality.
145. What does Van Til actually mean by "analogical reasoning"? Why is it crucial, according to him?
146. What does Van Til mean by defending Christianity "as a unit"? Explain the practical significance of doing so.
147. What is the proof of God's existence, according to Van Til?
148. What does Van Til mean by "reasoning from the impossibility of the contrary"?
149. Outline the basic steps in a presuppositional defense of Christianity.
150. How would one presuppositionally prove that the Bible is God's word?
151. Why must the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy be established "presuppositionally"? How is it accomplished?
152. Does the presuppositional method of apologetics rest upon the teaching of Scripture? Explain. Is this a defect or strength?
153. Does presuppositionalism lead to obscurantism in dealing with particular criticisms of Christianity?

Specific Problems Calling for Apologetical Answer

154. Why do you believe the Bible to be the word of God? (Do not assume Christian convictions on the part of your hearer.)
155. Would the answer you offered above equally lend support to the Koran? Why not?
156. How would you argue for the existence of God with an atheist? With an agnostic?
157. "There are many roads to God." Discuss.
158. "Christianity may be true for you, but not for me." Reply.
159. Defend the notion that Christianity is the only true religion and the only way of salvation. Why do people not think this is fair? Reply.
160. What response needs to be made to those who justify following another religious outlook (Mormonism, Buddhism, eclecticism) on the basis of a satisfying, subjective or personal experience?
161. "I have faith in God, but I do not necessarily believe that the teachings of the Bible are true." Respond.

162. What are some of the alleged contradictions taught in the Bible? (Mention both doctrinal and historical matters)
How should they be dealt with?
163. Name two or three alleged historical errors in the Bible for which you have an answer.
164. "There are so many different interpretations of the Bible (and so many denominational conflicts) that Christianity is really indefinable." What needs to be said in response?
165. What would it take for you to admit an error in Christianity?
166. In principle, are the claims of the Bible unfalsifiable?
167. "God is too far beyond us, too different from us, to be known by our ordinary reason or properly described in human language." Discuss.
168. "Revelation is not rational and cognitive, but a matter of subjective personal encounter." Reply.
169. How do we know which books belong in the canon?
170. How would you answer the claim that Christianity's key teachings were borrowed from other cults and religions?
171. Briefly describe the state of the debate over the literary authenticity and textual integrity of the Biblical books.
172. What are some of the common arguments against the possibility of miracles? How would you refute them?
173. Offer an apologetical answer to the claims of evolution.
174. Describe and then reply to the problem of evil.
175. How would you refute a deistic view of God?
176. How would you refute a pantheistic view of God?
177. How can God be both transcendent and immanent?
178. Can God create a stone so heavy that He cannot lift it?
179. If God foreordains all things, how can men be free and responsible for their actions?
180. "If God is omniscient, He infallibly knows what He will do in advance. Since He must do what He knows in advance, He cannot be free." (Alternatively; "He cannot be omnipotent since He cannot do anything different - cannot change His mind.") Respond.
181. How could an immaterial person (God) create a material object (the world)?
182. Does creation *ex nihilo* imply that the world is an extension of God's own being?
183. How could a man who was morally perfect fall into sin against God?
184. How could a man be both human and divine? (For instance, did Jesus know all things or not?).
185. How could there be only one God, but three persons who are God?

186. What are some of the arguments against life after death? Offer a rebuttal to them.
187. Discuss the problem of personal identity in a future resurrection of the body.
188. "Christianity is not true. Just look at the hypocrisy and failings of the church!" Reply.
189. "Christianity is not true. My prayers are not answered, and my personal needs were not met." Reply.
190. Discuss psychoanalytic and other psychologically-reductive views of religious faith.
191. "The actions of God and the ethic He prescribes in the Bible are too horrible to accept." Respond.
192. "It is unfair to hold others accountable for the sin of one man." What can be said by way of answer?
193. "The doctrine of hell is harsh and unjust." What can be said in reply?
194. How would you answer someone who repeatedly appealed to the institutional authority of the Roman Catholic magisterium?
195. What are some of the cardinal views of theological liberalism (modernism)?
196. How was neo-orthodoxy a reaction against liberalism? Was it orthodox?
197. Critically discuss the theology of Karl Barth.
198. In what ways did Bultmann and Tillich differ from Barth?
199. What was the "God is dead" movement? What was wrong with it?
200. Critically analyze the theology of hope (Moltmann, etc.).
201. What is challenging about the theological contribution of Pannenberg? Why is it nevertheless unsatisfactory?
202. Critically analyze process theology.
203. What is liberation theology? How would you respond to it?
204. Critically interact with situation ethics.
205. Criticize distinctive points of Mormon theology.
206. Why are you unwilling to recognize the *Book of Mormon* as inspired by God?
207. Interact with the distinctive claims of the Jehovah's Witnesses.
208. What does the Unification Church say about Rev. Moon? Reply.
209. Is Christian Science scientific? Is it Christian? Explain.
210. What are some of the cardinal doctrines of Hinduism? How would you argue against them?
211. What are some of the cardinal doctrines of Buddhism (distinguish Mahayana, Theravada, Zen)? How would you argue against them?

212. Summarize and criticize the basic cosmologies of Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Shintoism.
213. Describe and apologetically criticize three or four manifestations of occult religion today.
214. Offer an apologetical response to Hare Krishna, to Transcendental Meditation, to Divine Light Mission, to Theosophy.
215. Offer a defense of the Christian faith in reply to the challenge of Islam.
216. How would you defend the faith with a modern Jew? Would presuppositional method be useful if he were an orthodox Jew?
217. The problem with the Christian religion is that it has a pat intellectual answer for everything. There is no room for mystery, which is the heart of religion." Discuss.
218. How does Christianity present an intellectual challenge in a modern culture which is awed by science?
219. How does Christianity present a personal challenge in a modern culture which is dedicated to the body (health, fitness, sports, sex)?
220. How does Christianity present a social challenge in a modern culture which sees life oriented around politics?
221. Present an apologetical case for Christianity on the basis of some modern crisis (terrorism, drugs, abortion, racial tension, etc.).
222. Summarize the cultural apologetic offered by Schaeffer, or Guinness, or Rookmaker, or Schlossberg, etc.
223. Offer your own contribution to cultural apologetics by discussing a recent film, novel, work of art, or piece of music.
224. What cultural "idols" are presently a threat to the Reformed church in your estimation?
225. Is it reasonable to accept the truth of Christianity based upon its cultural relevance? Its personal satisfaction ("the manishness of man")?

A Selective Bibliography Of Helpful Works

1. Frame, seminary course syllabi for: doctrine of the knowledge of God, Christianity and the great debates, the modern mind.
2. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*
 - A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (esp. chapters 1-3, 8)
 - A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (esp. chapters 14-16)
 - "My Credo" (found in various publications)
3. Pratt, *Every Thought Captive*
4. Geehan (ed.), *Jerusalem and Athens* (esp. interactions with Dooyeweerd, Montgomery, Lewis and articles by Hughes, Home, Reid)

5. North (ed.), *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (esp. articles by Frame, Poythress, Bahnsen)
6. Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction*
7. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?*
8. Sahakian, *History of Philosophy* (a bare-bones summary by an unbeliever)
9. Copi, *Introduction to Logic*, esp. part I (standard text by an unbeliever)
10. Lutzer, *The Necessity of Ethical Absolutes*
11. Boa, *Cults World Religions and You*
12. Bahnsen, *A Biblical Introduction to Apologetics*

"Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism" (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20:4)

"The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens" (*Ashland Theological Bulletin* 13:1)

"Machen, Van Til, and the Apologetical Tradition of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church" (*Pressing Toward the Mark*, OPC anniversary volume, ed. Dennison)

Tape: "Debate with Gordon Stein: Does God Exist?" (Covenant Media Foundation 1-800-553-3938)].