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Front cover art

“This is a fresco painted in 1365 by Andrea da Firenze (? - 1377) in the Spanish Chapel in Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Thomas Aquinas sits on a throne in the center of the fresco, and on the lower level of the picture are Aristotle, Cicero (106–43 B.C.), Ptolemy (active A.D. 121–151), Euclid (active around 300 B.C.) and Pythagoras (580? - ? B.C.), all placed in the same category as Augustine.

“As a result of this emphasis, philosophy was gradually separated from revelation from the Bible, and philosophers began to act in an increasingly independent, autonomous manner.”—
Francis A. Schaeffer.

Part1 Natural Theology Its Origin, Nature and History

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Introduction Conflict Between Natural and Revealed Theologies

By Dr. Robert Morey

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols?” (2 Corinthians 6:14–16).

Introduction

The conflict between Natural and Revealed theologies existed long before Jesus was born. There were those Jews, such as Philo, who felt that Greek philosophy was so superior to the prophets that it would be better if Judaism abandoned its sole dependence on divine Revelation and instead appealed to Greek philosophic “Reason” as the Origin of truth. They were called Hellenistic Jews because they were more “Greek” than Jewish.

Orthodox Jews viewed Hellenistic Jews as traitors because they had turned their backs on the Torah and embraced Greek philosophy in the place of Scripture. Many of the books written

during the inter-testamental period record the violent conflicts between Hellenized and Orthodox Jews. 1 and 2 Maccabees record how the conflict unfolded in the life of the Jewish people.

Dr. H.W. Hoehner explains:

Hellenism is the devotion to ancient Gk. thought, customs, and life style.... Alexander the Great, who was taught by Aristotle, devoting his life to conquering the world for the spread of Gk. culture.... The entrenchment of Hellenism can more readily be seen among the Alexandrian Jews, esp. among some of their philosophers such as Philo, who adopted the allegorical interpretation which led to the sacrificing of the truth in the OT on the altar of pagan philosophy.¹

The Sadducees mentioned in the NT were the Hellenistic Jews of Jesus' time. They were theological liberals who followed Greek Natural theology in denying miracles, angels and demons, the immortality of the soul, and the resurrection of the body ([Acts 23:8](#)).

The Sadducees were the bitter enemies not only of the Orthodox Jews but also Jesus. They confronted Him with trick questions and evasive answers. In one brilliant exchange between the Sadducees and Jesus, He put them to shame by saying:

You are in error, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God! ([Matt. 22:29](#)).

The Pharisees were the Orthodox Jews of the NT. They did not accept the Sadducees as fellow Jews but as sell-outs to pagan Greek philosophy. Paul utilized their mutual hatred of each other when he announced that he was on trial for being a Pharisee who believed in the resurrection.

But perceiving that one part were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, Paul began crying out in the Council, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" And as he said this, there arose a dissension between the Pharisees and Sadducees; and the assembly was divided. For the Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, nor an angel, nor a spirit; but the Pharisees acknowledge them all. And there arose a great uproar; and some of the scribes of the Pharisaic party stood up and began to argue heatedly, saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man; suppose a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" And as a great dissension was developing, the commander was afraid Paul would be torn to pieces by them and ordered the troops to go down and take him away from them by force, and bring him into the barracks ([Acts 23:6–10](#)).

The Apostle was clearly on the Orthodox side and had no use for the liberals and their Natural theology. As a matter of fact, Paul never appealed to man's "reason" as the basis for doctrine and morals. He based his theology on Scripture alone ([1 Cor. 15:3–4](#)).

Later, a full scale theological war erupted in the Apostolic Church between those who followed Greek philosophy (Natural Theology) and those who followed Scripture (Revealed Theology). Such New Testament books as Colossians and 1 John were written to refute the invasion of Greek philosophy into the early church.

In [1 Tim. 6:20](#), Paul passionately warned Timothy not to listen to the siren call of philosophy.

¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 3:117.

O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you, avoiding worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called “knowledge.”

With rigorous thrusts of his verbal sword, the Apostle dismisses Greek philosophy (Plato, Aristotle, et al) as nothing more than mere “chatter,” i.e. foolish and frivolous talk that is a waste of time.

Philosophic “chatter” is described by Paul as:

“worldly”: finding its Origin in the world of Nature instead of in God’s revelation. Hence it is godless and profane.

“empty”: pointless, i.e. devoid of anything of profit to the Christian.

“falsely called knowledge”: Paul dismisses all of Greek philosophy as “pseudo knowledge,” which is actually the “antithesis” of real knowledge.

As an Orthodox Jew, Paul’s hostility to Greek philosophy is quite caustic and severe:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to the Messiah ([Colossians 2:8](#)).

Natural philosophy is dismissed by Paul as:

a. “empty deception”: foolish and pointless lies.

b. “the traditions of men”: finding its Origin in man and his traditions rather than in God and His revelation.

c. “the elementary principles of the world”:

Paul uses the technical Greek term for the “first principles” of Greek philosophy. He knew exactly what he was saying. These first principles were abstracted from “the world,” i.e. nature, instead of from divine revelation.

d. “not according to the Messiah”: A.T. Robertson explains:

And not after Christ (*KAI OU KATA CHRISTON*). Christ is the yardstick by which to measure philosophy and all phases of human knowledge. The Gnostics were measuring Christ by their philosophy as many men are doing today. They have it backwards. Christ is the measure for all human knowledge since he is the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe.”²

When some of the saints at Corinth fell into the error of following Greek philosophy instead of following Scripture, Paul reminds them that the philosophers of this world never found God by human reason, experience, faith or feelings.

For it is written, “I will destroy the philosophy of the philosophers, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.” Where is the philosopher? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the philosophy of this world? For since in the philosophy of God the world through its philosophy did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for miracles, and Greeks search for philosophy ([1 Corinthians 1:19–22](#)).

² Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931) IV:491.

The Greek lexicons are unanimous that the Greek word *wisdom* in the passage above is a clear attack of Paul upon Greek philosophy in general and Greek rhetoric in particular. Thayer states that *wisdom* here refers to:

the empty conceit of wisdom which men make a parade of, a knowledge more specious than real of lofty and hidden subjects: such as the theosophy of certain Jewish Christians, Col. 2:23; the philosophy of the Greeks, 1 Cor. 1:21f; 2:1; with τοῦ κόσμου added, 1 Cor. 1:20; 3:19; τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου, I Cor. 2:6; τῶν σοφῶν, I Cor. 1:19; ἀνθρώπων, 1 Cor. 2:5 (in each of these last passages the word includes also the rhetorical art, such as is taught in the schools), cf. Fritzsche, Romans, vol. i, p. 67f; σοφία τοῦ λόγου, the wisdom which shows itself in speaking (R.V. wisdom of words), the art of the rhetorician, 1 Cor. 1:17; λόγοι ἀνθρωπίνης (so R in 1 Cor. 1:4 (all texts in 1 Cor. 1:13) σοφίας, discourse conformed to philosophy and the art of rhetoric, 1 Cor. 2:4, 13.³

When the Apostle Paul mocks the vaunted claims of Greek philosophy as mere “foolishness,” he is only voicing the same attitude displayed by the prophets and the Apostles. To put it bluntly, the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is absolutely hostile to Natural religion, Natural law, and Natural theology.

It must also be pointed out that nowhere in the Bible do we ever find anyone at anytime encouraging the people of God to listen to the philosophers. No one in the Bible ever appealed to human reason, experience, feelings or faith as the basis of doctrine or morals.

Even though many today do not want to hear this, the Bible does not give us one kind word about Natural theology or philosophy. The attempt to discover truth, justice, morals, meaning, and beauty apart from and independent of Scriptures is everywhere declared a miserable failure (1 Cor. 1:25–31).

In this edition of the JBA we will explore the origin, nature, and history of Natural Theology and how it has been the mother of every heresy and false doctrine that has ever plagued the Christian Church. We will follow the example of the prophets, Apostles, and our Lord Himself in looking to Special Revelation as the Origin of truth, justice, morals, meaning, and beauty. The God who is there, is not silent but has spoken in Scripture that we might know who He is, who we are, and how we can come into His presence with acceptance.

We will also examine the pernicious teachings of Natural Theology by focusing on the arch heretic Thomas Aquinas. The Reformation delivered us from him and his Schoolmen whom Luther dismissed as Sophists. Yet, we are faced today with evangelical thinkers who call us to abandon the Reformation by returning to the official philosopher of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is no surprise to us that many of the men at the forefront of this modern counter-Reformation movement within evangelicalism graduated from Jesuit universities. They were taught by the Jesuits that the sun rises and sets on Thomas Aquinas and that his Natural Theology and philosophy is the ultimate basis of truth.

Our Protestant forefathers clearly saw that the Natural Theology of Thomas Aquinas was nothing more than a Trojan horse used by the Jesuits to wean Protestants away from the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. The Jesuits tricked naïve Protestant students into replacing *Sola Scriptura* with *Sola Ratione*.

³ Joseph Henry Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965) p. 582.

Human reason was then exalted as the Origin of truth, justice, morals, meaning and beauty. Today, Natural Theology and Thomism have gained new respectability among evangelicals through such Jesuit trained apologists as Dr. Norman Geisler, whose nickname, understandably, is “Roman” Geisler.

It is also no surprise to us that those who call for a return to Thomism are ecumenical and do not view Roman Catholicism as a false church. They are the same ones who use Roman Catholic textbooks in their college classes and have their students reading apostates such as Peter Kreeft. He was raised a Protestant but converted to Romanism and is now published by InterVarsity Press! Is it any wonder that some students have already converted to Catholicism?

In this issue and the next, we are going to reveal the heresies of Aquinas and how he denied the biblical gospel. We do not expect to see him in heaven because he not only tried to mix Aristotle with Christ but also works with grace.

Does Acts 17 Support the Natural Theology Theory?

R.K. McGregor Wright, Th.M., Ph.D.

Preamble

“Natural Theology” is the theory that we can establish the existence of God and certain of his attributes by empirically observing the world and deducing conclusions about God’s existence and nature from it, or that God’s existence can be established by reason alone, without prior reference to verbal or “special” revelation. That is, the claim of Natural Theology is that the task of apologetics should begin apart from Scripture, by first establishing God’s existence and attributes. Then we can proceed to prove Christianity is more reasonable and more probable than its competitors, and should therefore be believed.

It is commonly claimed that such Bible passages as [Psalms 8 and 19](#), [Romans 1](#), and [Acts 14:8–18](#) and [17:16–34](#), all support the project of Natural Theology. Here we are concerned with the last of these references, with Paul’s Areopagus address only. Do the Apostle’s arguments at Athens justify Natural Theology? I think not. The following verse-by-verse comments should show why. Readers should have a Bible open to see these verses for themselves while reading the explanation.

The Areopagus Address Examined

Verse 16–17 Naturally as a Jew, Paul was disgusted by the flagrant idolatry of the city of Athens, and was “disputing with the Jews and with devout persons” (worshippers before idols) in the market-place. This was all in the face of the long history of the philosophers criticizing idol-worship as absurd. Among the “devout persons” (KJV) were always some gentile adherents of Judaism who respected the God of Israel, while not going through the process of conversion to the synagogue. They were also called “God-fearers,” and are several times referred to in Acts. Luke himself was probably among them when he first heard the Gospel from Paul.

Verse 18–21 The two most popular philosophical systems in the first century were the Stoics and the Epicureans, and they apparently thought Paul was preaching about some “foreign deities” (v. 18), which was technically contrary to Athenian law. Perhaps they thought the “Iesous and Anastasis” (Jesus and resurrection) were his gods. These names would look to them like one of the male-female pairs of gods described by many pagan religions. In the following centuries the Gnostics would make much of such pairs of divine principles, but Gnosticism did not exist as a separate movement in Paul’s day. So the philosophers took him to the Areopagus council to be vetted. To them, the Gospel was just one more “new teaching” to peak their curiosity (vs. 19–21).

Philosophers and religious leaders often went to the market-place to advertise classes and to gather students with sample lectures. Debates were a favorite entertainment in the Greek culture, and were a valued educational technique. The Sophist teachers of rhetoric bragged that they could prove a proposition in the morning and disprove it in the afternoon. So “truth” was relative to the power of persuasion.

Verse 22–23 Natural Theology of the “classical apologetics” type, wants to see in these verses a Paul who is trying to “build an intellectual bridge of common ground” to reach the hearts of the Greek intellectuals. Instead, Paul tells them they are “in everything too superstitious” (*DEISIDAIMONESTEROUS*, with nineteen letters, said to be the longest Greek term in the NT).

This is not a neutral term, much less a compliment. The term was among the standard words of contempt used by the Greeks to characterize the cults and religions of Barbarians and subject classes. A form of it appears in [Acts 25:19](#), where it is used by Festus to describe the “superstition” of Judaism. In Latin it would translate *superstitio*, a term referring to unreasonable or fanatical religious ideas.

Paul points out that they even had an altar dedicated to an “Unknown God” among the elaborate and artistically-worked idols of the city. But this, he implies, only proved how “ignorant” they were, and Paul was now going to announce to them the truth about this “Unknown” God. Examples of these altars have been found in Asia Minor, now Turkey. One early source explains them by saying that because the gods came often to earth to visit men, the spots where they touched down were thought to be sacred, and various occult tricks were used to find these blessed sites by divination. One method was to place a ram in the area, and following the sheep around, they would wait for it to lie down, which would identify the spot to build the altar to an unknown god who had arrived at that spot. Be that as it may, the altar was indeed there, and Paul uses it to convict the philosophers of Athens of ignorance and superstition, of which it is indeed a perfect example. Paul’s God is not only not unknowable, but he is actually known.

Paul’s approach doesn’t sound much like a search for commonality to me. And it gets worse, not better.

Verse 24–25 Paul here sets forth the God of Israel as the Personal Creator of everything that exists (“heaven and earth” includes everything, reflecting the Creator-creature distinction of [Gen. 1:1](#) and [Isaiah 40–55](#), and [John 1:1–3](#)), and rejects the most important starting principles of Greek philosophy, their rejection of the concept of creation out of nothing, the equation of God with “Being-in-general,” and in the case of the Stoics, the impersonality of their Logos idea, for

this Creator is “Lord” and therefore personal, just like in John’s first chapter. Worse, this God cannot be found in man’s temples, for he is not localized or finite like the gods of the Greeks. So Paul is saying that pagan worship is worship of nothing, of the Void.

Jesus himself warned that his people would not follow localized worship in the coming age (Jn 4:20–24), and Paul agrees. In fact, nothing we do can meet God’s “needs,” for he is wholly independent of his creation, needing nothing (v. 25) from us, certainly not the complex patterns of Greek temple worship. He is himself the origin of all life, of individual souls (“breath”), and created absolutely “all things” (*TA PANTA*). This rejects *hylozoism* (the Greek notion of the cosmos as a great evolving organism of living matter evolving into gods and men), the existence of “the All” as a topic of predication, and Stoic materialism. But this involves a complete rejection of the philosophical basis of Greek ontology.

Verse 26–27 These verses refute another favorite Greek notion, that mankind is conveniently divided into the “spirituals” (the *PNEUMATIKOI*), (the “soulish” (the *PSUCHIKOI*) and the “fleshly” (the *SARKIKOI*), of which only the first group, naturally adept at philosophy, are worth cultivating, being sons of the gods. Paul says that against this Greek prejudice and intellectual snobbishness, all people come from one blood (Adam) and that God predestined where all the tribes and nations would migrate and live. All this was to serve his sovereign purpose of demanding recognition from the nations. God’s sovereignty should induce us to seek him (Rom 2:1–4), for against the Epicurean theory that the gods were distant and did not care about us, He is close to all of us. The implication is that if these Greeks were true seekers they would have encountered him already.

Verse 28 contains two quotations from famous Greek sources designed to prove Paul’s point about the falsity of their world-view. The first is from Epimenides (“in him we live and move and have our being”), a poet appealed to by the Epicureans, but inconsistent with their polytheism. The second is from the Stoic poet Aratus (“for we are also his offspring”) to confute Stoic pantheism.

These quotations are very carefully chosen, because he quotes a verse sounding pantheistic from a polytheist and a verse from a polytheist that sounds pantheistic. In this way both parties are convicted of self-contradictory ideas. Paul knows how to play one part of an audience off against the other, and he does so here with skill, just as he will do again in Acts 23:6–9.

There is no possibility that Paul was quoting these philosophical poets to support his own view of God, because both he and his audience knew they did not. Paul rejected both the pantheism of the one and the polytheism of the other. Paul is not using these sources to build his own case on, for he had already rejected their views in his previous arguments, but to show that pagan religious philosophy is self-contradictory. This leaves them nowhere to go logically but towards the God of Paul. But he is not finished yet.

Verse 29 Paul now argues that Greek religious theory and practice also contradict each other. If we come from God as his sons and daughters, how can God be like these physical idols the Greeks adore? How can God be like something you made yourselves? Idolatry is a crock. However,

Verse 30–31 close the argument. Reminding them again of the ignorance he started with, Paul now argues that God commands repentance of “all men,” not just certain classes. Even

philosophers must repent of their sin to approach God. The only solution to the unresolvable pantheism-polytheism dilemma is for sinners to abandon their false presuppositions about Being and the plurality of gods, and accept the direct verbal revelation given in a specific historical event, namely in Jesus who rose from the dead in the same body he died in. God's revelation requires not philosophical speculations, but personal repentance. God's revelation is a command which must be obeyed. This particularism demanding faith in a particular historical person was especially offensive to these people, for the Stoics saw themselves as "citizens of the world."

The shocking thing for the Athenians to swallow was that this risen Jesus was not even a Greek, but a despised Jew, and the Greeks had no use for their bodies after death. The body was material, the prison-house of the soul, which was immortal, being a part of the cosmic spirit or Logos. It would naturally return to the higher realms of the Great Chain of Being after death. With a trip like that ahead, who needs a body? But for Paul it is impossible to reach God by a speculative Natural Theology, for God as the beginning of wisdom, knowledge, and instruction ([Prov 1:7, 9:10, 15:33](#)), is the presupposition of human reasoning, not just a conclusion from a neutral argument. You must repent and start with God, or he will judge you at the last day through this Jew Jesus. And his bodily resurrection proves he was who he said he was, and that he will indeed be God's Judge in the last days. History is not cyclic, but moving towards future final events, in which the second coming of Jesus will be just as real an historical event as his first coming was.

This last point rejects the Greek cyclic view of reality and substitutes the Biblical linear view of real history. For Paul, history is not just "a moving image of eternity," but a real concrete sequence of created events building up to the establishment of God's universal Kingdom, the unfolding of the preordained plan of a personal God.

There are over twenty separate Greek doctrines rejected by Paul in this brief compass (probably only a summary by Luke of the whole lecture), and a biblical alternative is offered for every one of them. In principle, Paul completely demolished the entire Greek philosophical and religious world-view and replaced it with the Bible's world-view. He rejected their ontology, their epistemology, their ethics, and their teleology. And by implication, this covers everything of importance.

Conclusion?

This address was not an exercise in bridge-building, but a massive clash of incompatible world-views. The results were telling; a mere handful came to faith, including Dionysius, one of the Areopagus council itself, and Damaris, perhaps a visiting businesswoman from the north, and a few others. Unfortunately, Paul had no occasion to write a letter to a flourishing church in Athens.

Nowhere in the Areopagus address does Paul argue as the Greeks often did, starting with the world and ending with a "proof" of God. He simply demolishes their world-view while offering his own, and demands repentance and acceptance of the presuppositions of the Bible. He develops no argument for the existence of God, but demands that they begin with the God of the Jewish revelation, just as the Bible itself does in [Genesis 1:1](#).

Paul assumes that God's being and attributes are visible through the creation, just as he says they are in [Romans 1](#) and [Acts 14:8-18](#). This General Revelation does not require or even suggest a Natural Theology. As the Christian philosopher Gordon Clark used to say, "If you begin with the world to try to reach God, you will lose both God and the world; but if you start

with God, he'll throw the world in for free!" This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance....

The tradition of Natural Theology was borrowed directly from the Greeks by the early church fathers, and made *de Fide* for Catholicism by Thomas Aquinas, and was then ratified by Vatican I in 1870. But there is no such program begun in [Acts 17](#).

For the origins of Natural Theology in the Greek philosophical tradition, see the previous article in the Journal of Biblical Apologetics of Fall 2000, page 8. The author may be contacted at rkwjc@earthlink.net, or through this Journal.

John H. Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant By Dr. Robert L. Reymond

In his article, "Aquinas Was a Protestant," which appeared in the May 1994 issue of *Tabletalk*, the popular monthly devotional publication of Ligonier Ministries, Inc., edited by R.C. Sproul, Jr., Dr. John H. Gerstner ⁽¹⁾ declared that Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) "was a medieval Protestant teaching the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone" ⁽¹³⁾—indeed, that he "taught the biblical doctrine of justification" ⁽¹⁴⁾⁽²⁾—and that he was "one of Protestantism's greatest theologians" ⁽¹⁴⁾.

⁽¹⁾ (1) In keeping with my habit of permitting living authors, particularly living evangelical authors, to see what I am writing about their scholarly assertions prior to publication, I sent Dr. Gerstner this response to his article and requested that he carefully peruse it and indicate to me any place where he thought I may have misrepresented his view or had betrayed my main objective—to speak the truth in love. However, Dr. Gerstner entered into the presence of his Lord in March 1996 before he had the opportunity to respond. I deeply regret that I and my readers will not have the benefit of his reactions. (An earlier version of this essay appeared in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Volume 59, 1997, pages 113–121.—Editor.)

⁽¹³⁾ (13) The Council of Trent stated in its Sixth Session, Chapter XVI: "... to those who *work well unto the end* and trust in God, eternal life is offered, both as a grace mercifully promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus, and *as a reward* promised by God Himself, *to be faithfully given to their good works and merits* ... nothing further is wanting to those justified [in Rome's sense of the word] to prevent them from being considered to have, *by those very works* which have been done in God, *fully satisfied the divine law* according to the state of this life and *to have truly merited eternal life*" (emphasis supplied).

⁽¹⁴⁾ (14) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) declares: "The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that God *has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace*. The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration, so that the merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful... Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow *true merit* on us as a result of God's gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us 'coheirs' with Christ and worthy of

While Gerstner acknowledged that Augustine did not adequately develop the forensic element in justification, he asserted that Aquinas “was not led astray” but “with Augustine taught the biblical doctrine of justification so that if the Roman church had followed Aquinas the Reformation would not have been absolutely necessary” ⁽¹⁴⁾⁽³⁾.

Gerstner also called the supposition, drawn by both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians alike, that Aquinas was a “modern tridentine Romanist” a “pernicious error” ⁽¹⁴⁾. He drew these conclusions because, he said, “Aquinas taught a doctrine of *iustificatio impii*, a justification of the impious” ⁽¹⁴⁾⁽⁴⁾.

What is surprising—indeed, quite startling—about Dr. Gerstner’s assessment of Aquinas is that in this same article he admits that Aquinas (1) “unfortunately attributed . . . undue power to the sacraments” ⁽¹³⁾⁽¹⁴⁾; (2) understood *iustificatio impii* in terms of “remission and infusion of sanctifying grace” ⁽¹⁴⁾; and (3) “does not state the ‘imputation’ of Christ’s righteousness” ⁽¹⁴⁾. But in spite of these doctrinal deficiencies, Dr. Gerstner believed that Aquinas’ teaching on justification is still “essentially the biblical (and Reformation) doctrine” ⁽¹⁴⁾.

Far from Aquinas’ understanding of justification being rejected “with horror, as Protestant” by the Council of Trent (Gerstner, 52), it was precisely how Rome’s counter-Reformation Council of Trent construed justification. ⁽⁵⁾ If Aquinas’ writings erred so “horribly”—in the very area where the Reformers were attacking Romish theology—by siding with the Reformers, it is difficult to understand why the Reformers never claimed him or why Rome raised him in 1567, four years after the close of the Council of Trent, to the dignity of “Doctor of the Church” and regards him to this day as the Doctor Angelicus. David S. Schaff’s remarks, found in Philip Schaff’s *History of the Christian Church*, clearly are more on the mark:

In the teachings of Thomas Aquinas we have, with one or two exceptions [the Protestant doctrine of justification not being one of them—RLR] the doctrinal tenets of

obtaining ‘the promised inheritance of eternal life.’ The merits of our good works are gifts of the divine goodness” (paragraphs 2008, 2009).

⁽²⁾ (2) The Reformation (and Biblical) doctrine of justification by faith alone is beautifully captured by the Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 33, “What is justification?”: “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

⁽³⁾ (3) Apparently Dr. Gerstner would have disagreed with Carl F.H. Henry’s recent assessment of these two theologians: “Augustine (354–430) conflated the immediate act of justification with the process of sanctification and consequently misrepresented justification as a ‘making righteous.’ Thomas Aquinas . . . also viewed justifying grace as a supernatural quality infused into the sinner. Justification he depicted in terms of operative divine grace transmitted in the sacraments. The Roman Church’s elevation of Thomism as its official theology proliferated the view that justification is an inner state dependent upon sacramental observance” (“Justification: A Doctrine in Crisis,” *JETS* 38/1 [March 1995] 58).

⁽⁴⁾ (4) Aquinas’ use of the phrase *iustificatio impii* means nothing in itself; it is the language of the Latin Vulgate at [Romans 4:5](#): *qui iustificat impium*. It is what he says “justification of the impious” is that is all-important, and in this area Thomas’ theology of justification is defective.

⁽⁵⁾ (5) See the “Decree Concerning Justification,” particularly Chapters VII-X and Canons 9–12, Council of Trent, Sixth Session.

the Latin Church in their perfect exposition as we have them in the Decrees of the Council of Trent in their final statement....

[T]he theology of the Angelic Doctor and the theology of the Roman Catholic Church are identical in all particulars except the immaculate conception. He who understands Thomas understands the mediaeval theology at its best and will be in possession of the doctrinal system of the Roman Church....

No distinction was made by the mediaeval theologians between the doctrine of justification and the doctrine of sanctification, such as is made by Protestant theologians. Justification was treated as a process of making the sinner righteous, and not as a judicial sentence by which he was declared to be righteous....

Although several of Paul's statements in the Epistle to the Romans are quoted by Thomas Aquinas, neither he nor the other Schoolmen rise to the idea that it is upon the [condition] of faith that a man is justified. Faith is a virtue, not a justifying principle, and is treated at the side of hope and love. ⁽⁶⁾ In sum, it is this supernatural and intermediary change in human nature, according to Aquinas, rather than Christ's alien righteousness (*iustitia Christi aliena*), which is the basis of justification.

Dr. Gerstner explained the absence of any mention in Aquinas of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect sinner this way:

“[The imputation of Christ's righteousness] is *implied* by the infusion of sanctifying grace which would never have been infused into an unjustified soul” ⁽¹⁴⁾, emphasis supplied). ⁽⁷⁾

And he traces the “pernicious error” ⁽⁸⁾ that everyone (except, apparently, Dr. Gerstner himself) commits about Aquinas being a “modern tridentine Romanist” to the fact that Aquinas “mention[s] infusion in connection with justification” ⁽¹⁴⁾.

⁽⁶⁾ (6) Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1960 reproduction of the 1907 edition), V, 662, 675, 754, 756. Alister E. McGrath (*Luther's Theology of the Cross* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1985], 82) also writes: “During the thirteenth century the concept of a created habit of grace [a permanent disposition within the believer, as distinct from the external influence of grace] ... had become inextricably linked with the discussion of the mode of man's justification before God. The concept appeared to provide a solution to a dilemma which the theological renaissance of the twelfth century had highlighted: in what manner can God be said to dwell in the souls of the justified?... St. Thomas ... located the solution to the problem as lying in the concept of a created habit which, although essentially indistinguishable from God, nevertheless remains an entity created within the human soul by him.

“Underlying the implication of a created habit of grace in justification is a particular concept of causality. For St. Thomas ... the nature of grace, sin and divine acceptance were such that a created habit of grace was necessary in justification by the very nature of things.”

⁽⁷⁾ (7) Dr. Gerstner said here in so many words that Aquinas believed that the soul would first have to be justified (in the Protestant sense) before God would infuse it with sanctifying grace. I am unaware of any place in his writings where Aquinas states this. To the contrary, he regularly declares that the infusion of grace and the movement of free choice toward God and away from sin is “in the order of nature” first required for the justification of the ungodly (*Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 113, article 8). Rome regularly denies as a matter of course what Dr. Gerstner said here of Aquinas.

“But,” Dr. Gerstner declared, “so do Protestants, though they do not commonly use that term *infusion*”⁽¹⁴⁾. Here Dr. Gerstner said in effect that “Protestants do and Protestants don’t”—that is to say, that they mention infusion in connection with justification but they do not use the term when they mention it! I say again, all this is quite startling, coming as it did from a renowned Reformed church historian who knew and accepted the Protestant doctrine of justification.⁽⁹⁾

Dr. Gerstner went on to fault in quick succession several Protestant theologians by name for what he represented as their sub-biblical view of justification. He took to task Kenneth Foreman, who wrote in the 1955 “Extension” to *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, for stressing that justification “does not refer to the state of man, only to his status,” and for saying that justification “is nothing done to the man, it is God’s way of looking at him.”

Dr. Gerstner declared Foreman’s first statement to be true enough (“True, [justification] does not ‘refer to the state of man,’”¹⁵), but then he obviated any real significance in his concession by

⁽⁸⁾ (8) These “pernicious errorists” would of necessity include the two great Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, for neither of them claimed Aquinas for the Reformation cause. Indeed, Luther, with characteristic bombast, spoke of him as “the fountain [*Brunn*] and original soup [*Grundsuppe*] of all heresy, error, and Gospel havoc [*aller Ketzerei, Irrthumb und Vertilgung des Evangelium*], as his books bear witness” (Schaff, *History*, V, 676).

It has been argued, as does H. Denifle (*Luther und Luthertum in der erste Entwicklung* [Mainz: 1906, 2nd edition], I.2.535–56), that Luther, being the late medieval Augustinian that he was and educated within the *via moderna*, that is, within Occamism’s metaphysical nominalism, knew only the early medieval theology, including Aquinas, from the historical sections of Gabriel Biel’s *Collectorium* which had distorted the theology of the earlier medieval period. Thus Luther, Denifle argues, was prejudiced against “catholic” theology in general and the *via antiqua*, that is, Thomism’s and Scotism’s metaphysical realism, of the thirteenth century in particular. But Luther could and did read Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* for himself, as his statement suggests.

Calvin declared that the definition of justification which the Council of Trent proffered at length “contains nothing else than the trite dogma of the schools [of which Aquinas was the most mature representative—RLR]: that men are justified partly by the grace of God and partly by their own works” (“On the Sixth Session of the Council of Trent,” *Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983 reprint of Calvin’s Tracts], 3, 108).

⁽⁹⁾ (9) One can only guess at the reason that lies behind Dr. Gerstner’s apologetic for a “Protestant” Aquinas in the area of justification, but one who knows of Dr. Gerstner’s admiration of Thomistic natural theology cannot help but wonder if it was not his appreciation of the contribution which Aquinas’ dichotomistic nature/grace scheme made to his own apologetic system that drove him to try to “save” Aquinas *in toto* for Protestantism.

¹⁵ (15) Luther declared: “These arguments of the Scholastics about the merit of congruence and of worthiness (*de merito congrui et condigni*) are nothing but vain figments and dreamy speculations of idle folk about worthless stuff. Yet they form the foundation of the papacy, and on them it rests to this very day. For this is what every monk imagines: By observing the sacred duties of my order I can earn the grace of congruence, but by the works I do after I have received this grace I can accumulate a merit so great that it will not only be enough to bring me to eternal life but enough to sell and give it to others.” Luther wrote further: “There is no such thing as merit; but all who are justified are justified for nothing (*gratis*), and this is credited to no one but to the grace of God.” Again Luther stated: “For Christ alone it is proper to help and save others

saying: “but it does not exclude it” either ⁽¹⁵⁾. He faulted Foreman’s second statement, saying: “If nothing were done to the man, God would not look at him as justified” ⁽¹⁵⁾. Now one could agree with Dr. Gerstner here if he had gone on to say that what God did to the sinner in justifying him was to constitute him righteous in His sight by the divine act of imputation, but this is not what he said. Rather, what God does to the sinner, Dr. Gerstner said, is to *regenerate* him (“He is a regenerate man though God ‘looks at him’ as still among the *impii!*”, ¹⁵, emphasis original)—an assertion that is not part of the Biblical definition of justification, and which, if left as is, injects the same confusion into the meaning of justification that the Reformers had to address in the sixteenth century.

Gerstner criticized as illogical J.P. Simpson, who wrote the article on justification in *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, for saying that the term *justification* “implies a personal status or relationship, and not a subjective experience,” and rejoined by saying: “But what is faith if not a ‘subjective experience?’” ⁽¹⁵⁾. He then went on to say that it is this “big little slip” on Simpson’s part that “throws his whole subsequent historical survey somewhat out of kilter, including Aquinas’ view” ⁽¹⁵⁾.

But it is Dr. Gerstner who is confused here. While faith in Jesus Christ, as a (Spirit-wrought) mental act, is surely a subjective experience, it is not justification *per se* and it is not what the Bible means by justification. Faith is the necessary instrument to justification while justification—a constituting and declarative act—is the inevitable divine response to the sinner’s faith in Jesus Christ.

Dr. Gerstner could not deny that Aquinas wrote in his *Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 100, article 12, that

...justification [properly so called] may be taken in two ways. First, according as man is made just by becoming possessed of the habit of justice; secondly, according as he does works of justice, so that in this sense justification is nothing else than the execution of justice. Now justice, like the other virtues, may denote either the acquired or the infused virtue.... The acquired virtue is caused by works; but the infused virtue [of the execution of justice] is caused by God Himself through His grace. The latter is true justice, of which we are speaking now, and in respect of which a man is said to be just before God, according to Rom. 4.2. ⁽¹⁰⁾

If nothing more were to be said in response to this citation, one must surely insist that Aquinas committed grave exegetical error here, for the one thing Paul did not mean in [Romans 4:2ff.](#) is that the respect in which a man is said to be just before God is that of an “infused righteousness.” Rather, the respect in which Paul declares that a man is just before God is through Christ’s imputed or “credited” righteousness, which is made clear throughout [Romans 4](#) by Paul’s sustained employment of the verb *LOGIZOMAI* (“count, reckon, credit, look upon as”):

with His merits and works. The works of others are of benefit to no one, not to themselves either; for the statement stands: ‘The just shall live by faith’ ([Rom. 1:17](#)).” (*What Luther Says: An Anthology* [Saint Louis: Concordia, 1959], II, 921–922.

⁽¹⁰⁾ (10) Cited from Thomas Aquinas: II, Vol. 20 in *Great Books of the Western World*, ed., Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1952), 285.

Romans 4:3: “What does the Scripture say? ‘Abraham believed God, and it was credited [*ELOGISTHE*] to him as righteousness.”

Romans 4:4: “...when a man works, his wages are not credited [*OU LOGIZETA*] to him as a gift, but as an obligation.”

Romans 4:5: “...to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, ⁽¹¹⁾his faith is credited [*LOGIZETA*] as righteousness.”

Romans 4:6: “...the man to whom God credits [*LOGIZETA*] righteousness apart from works.”

Romans 4:8: “Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count [*OU ME LOGISETA*] against him.”

Romans 4:9: “We have been saying that Abraham’s faith was credited [*ELOGISTHE*] to him as righteousness.”

Romans 4:10: “Under what circumstances was it credited [*ELOGISTHE*]?”

Romans 4:11: “...[Abraham] is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited [*LOGISTHENAI*] to them.”

Romans 4:22: “This is why ‘it was credited [*ELOGISTHE*] to him as righteousness.”

Romans 4:23–24: “The words ‘it was credited [*ELOGISTHE*] to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit [*LOGIZESTHA*] righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.”

But more can be said. It was directly from the Schoolmen, including Aquinas, ⁽¹²⁾that Trent derived its teaching of the condign and congruous merit of good works. ⁽¹³⁾But whereas Rome, still following Trent today, ⁽¹⁴⁾affirms that it is fitting for God to reward the saints’ congruous merit with eternal salvation, Paul and the Reformers ⁽¹⁵⁾taught that the Bible’s doctrine of grace puts all talk of human works and merit in any sense of the word, save for Christ’s, off limits as worthy of or as earning salvation.

Dr. Gerstner also approved the Roman Catholic scholar Michael Root’s faulting of Alister E. McGrath for saying that Protestants understand justification as “‘strictly’ a legal declaration of

⁽¹¹⁾ (11) On the basis of Paul’s statement here to the effect that God “justifies the ungodly”—the same Greek phrase as is used in the LXX in Exo dus 23:7 and *Isaiah 5:23* of corrupt judgments which God will not tolerate—J.I. Packer declared that Paul’s doctrine of justification is a “startling doctrine” (“Justification,” *EDT*, 595). Not only does Paul declare that God does it but also that He does it in a manner designed “to demonstrate His justice” (*Romans 3:25–26*). Of course, Paul relieves what otherwise would be a problem of theodicy by teaching that God justifies the ungodly on just grounds, namely, that the claims of God’s law upon them have been fully satisfied by Jesus Christ acting and dying in their stead.

⁽¹²⁾ (12) Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 114, article 3, wrote: “If ... we speak of a meritorious work according as it proceeds from the grace of the Holy Spirit moving us to life everlasting, it is meritorious of life everlasting condignly.” It must also be observed that the very fact that *Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 113, in which Aquinas sets forth his doctrine of the justification of the ungodly, is followed immediately by question 114, “Of Merit, Which is the Effect of Co-operating Grace,”—is alone sufficient indication that he was thinking about justification as a medieval Schoolman and not as a pre-Reformation “Protestant.”

righteousness which works no ‘real change’ in the believer” (52). When Root stated that according to “every Reformation theologian I know, however, coming to faith in the justifying righteousness of Christ constitutes a momentous change in the believer,” Dr. Gerstner declared that Root is only demonstrating that he understood “historic Protestant justification” better than some Protestant theologians do, including McGrath apparently (52).

But again, this is to confuse coming to faith in the justifying righteousness of Christ with the act of justification itself, which follows logically upon one’s coming to faith and which, as McGrath stated, is strictly a legal declaration of righteousness which in and of itself works no “real change” in the believer. It is not McGrath, therefore, who has failed to distinguish carefully the Protestant doctrine of justification from regeneration, faith and sanctification. Regrettably, it was Dr. Gerstner who confused all these doctrines when he wrote:

...when Jesus Christ unites Himself with an elect soul, that person is so united with Him that his regenerated soul trusts Christ for eternal salvation, his sins’ guilt is remitted, and divine righteousness received. In this act [!] instantly and forever after, the soul believes and obeys Jesus Christ ^[14].

Dr. Gerstner here described union with Christ, regeneration (which is the Spirit’s work), faith in Christ (which while it is produced by the Spirit is nevertheless the sinner’s act and is always accompanied by repentance), forgiveness (which is the Father’s act), the “reception” of divine righteousness (which is hardly the Protestant definition of justification according to which the sinner does not subjectively “receive” divine righteousness; rather, God declares it about or reckons it to him), and forever-after-obedience on the saved soul’s part, which are six aspects of the Reformed *ordo salutis*, as “this act”—a grave and confusing over-simplification!

Of course, what Dr. Gerstner was concerned to underscore throughout his article—and this is another reason why he is so enamored of Aquinas, whom he believed was saying the same thing—is the inseparability of justification and sanctification in the saved person’s experience. Dr. Gerstner hoped thereby to combat Antinomianism. His concern about Antinomianism was proper, but the way he made his case ⁽¹⁾ sacrificed the Biblical meaning of justification on the altar of sanctification and works; ⁽²⁾ was an erroneous reading of Aquinas; ⁽¹⁶⁾ and ⁽³⁾ confused distinct soteriological concepts that must always be distinguished in theological writing for the sake of accurate communication of the redemptive truth revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

While no sound Protestant theologian would deny that progressive sanctification is the inevitable and immediate concomitant to justification (effected, however, not by the Father’s justifying act but by the Spirit’s regenerating act) and that in this sense justification and sanctification “can never be separated,” I know of no sound Protestant theologian either who would bring the notion, much less the term, of the infusion of sanctifying grace into his definition of justification. Dr. Gerstner did this when he insisted, with Aquinas, that justification includes the state of man, his regeneration, his coming to faith, and his “forever-after-

⁽¹⁶⁾ (16) Dr. Gerstner was asking us to believe that for seven hundred years no one except the Council of Trent read Aquinas correctly (and that Council, he avers, was “horrified” at what it read and rejected him), and that it is he who was again reading Aquinas aright. Stranger things have happened in church history, I suppose, but I cannot think of one offhand. One may be pardoned were he to conclude that it is far more likely that it was Dr. Gerstner who was misreading Aquinas.

obedience.”⁽¹⁷⁾ And to do what Dr. Gerstner did is to commit “pernicious error,” for such teaching, against Scripture, means that one can never know in this life whether he is justified, thereby dishonoring the Savior, and thus eliminates the full assurance to which, according to Scripture, justification should lead through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, when Dr. Gerstner concluded his article by urging his readers “forward to the Reformation, to Thomas Aquinas, to the New Testament, to JUSTIFICATION BY CHRIST ALONE BY A FAITH THAT IS NOT ALONE” (52), without also saying that faith is the alone instrument of justification, he fosters the confusion that justification is by faith and works and fails to exhibit the special care the Westminster Confession of Faith exhibits when it declares: “Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification: yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but works by love” (XI/ii).

No, Aquinas was not a medieval Protestant teaching the Biblical and Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. Rather, Aquinas taught that justification was the making of the sinner righteous by means of the sacraments of baptism and the Mass as well as by acts of penance.

Nor was he “one of Protestantism’s greatest theologians”—for the reasons already noted as well as for others which could have been. Rather, Aquinas was the Schoolmen’s purest and maturest representative of medieval Latin theology and of Rome’s sacerdotal system. He stressed the primacy of grace in the movement from sinner to saint, but his explanation of justification (*Summa Theologica*, ii, 1, question 113) continued to rely upon the standard four-part schema which went back to Peter of Poitiers’ *Sentences* (III. 2) in which justification is represented as a *processus iustificationis* entailing the infusion of grace, the movement of the soul, arising from grace and free will, from a state of guilt to a state of righteousness, contrition, and the forgiveness of sins.

Dr. Gerstner asserted, as we have already noted, that “if the Roman church had followed Aquinas the Reformation would not have been absolutely necessary”⁽¹⁴⁾. In fact, Rome endorsed the theology of Aquinas (not exclusively, of course), and the Reformation was indeed necessary because it did.

G.C. Berkouwer wrote of the “polite aloofness” which exists between Pauline thought and Roman Catholicism:

The neglect of Paul in the middle ages was not the result of a direct denial of his significance. Paul’s letters did not go untouched. *Thomas Aquinas has left us a commentary on Romans. But one need only lay this commentary alongside of that of Luther to become aware of the profound difference between them.* The words of Paul were exegeted by Roman Catholic scholars, but they were not allowed to function in their original, radically evangelical power. It was first in the Reformation that the old words of Paul came through again in unprecedented religious clarity. They unleashed a storm over Europe, and yet brought peace and comfort to a generation of restless souls.⁽¹⁸⁾

⁽¹⁷⁾ (17) Jonathan Edwards in his “Five Discourses on Important Subjects, Concerning the Soul’s Eternal Salvation,” the first of which treats “Justification by Faith Alone,” writes: “... in truth, obedience has no concern in justification, any otherwise than as an expression of faith” (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974], I, 642).

⁽¹⁸⁾ (18) G.C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 64–65 (emphasis supplied).

With sixteenth-century Rome's doctrine of justification, following as it did the theological thought of Thomas Aquinas (among others), the Reformation was very much a necessity, and every informed Christian thanks God for it. Dr. Gerstner's article, with its confusing representation of justification and how it is obtained, will perplex many who are not prepared to think about these issues discerningly.

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The Apologetic of R.C. Sproul: Biblical and Reformed? A Critique

By Charles D. Heck

Introduction

Written from a Reformed, Van Tillian perspective, this paper explores some of the basic elements of R.C. Sproul's apologetical approach (and that of Ligonier Ministries, of which Sproul is the founder and chairman), and endeavors to critique as well as contrast elements of Sproul's method with that of Cornelius Van Til.¹ In so doing, this paper will set forth and then attempt to answer the following questions (which will provide the basic outline for this study): (1) What is the apologetical method of R.C. Sproul and Ligonier Ministries and what are some of its essential differences with the apologetic of Cornelius Van Til? (2) What are the underlying presuppositions of the Ligonier apologetic? (3) Are these presuppositions consistent with the Reformed faith? (4) Are they faithful to the Word of God?

Before engaging in this analysis, a word about the incentive for this paper: The present writer is a layman who began his journey into Reformed thought in the fall of 1991 after attending a Ligonier Conference. After a brief flirtation with Ligonier apologetics and exposure to the Ligonier polemic against Van Til's presuppositionalism² in the book, *Classical Apologetics*,³ I

¹ Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) was professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary for over 40 years, having been chosen for the task by J. Gresham Machen, the Seminary's founder. (For an interesting discussion of Machen and Van Til in this regard, see Greg Bahnsen's article, "Machen, Van Til and the Apologetical Tradition of the OPC," originally published in the book, *Pressing Toward the Mark*, C.G. Dennison and R.C. Gamble, editors, Philadelphia: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986. A reprint can be ordered from Covenant Media Foundation [or CMF, #PA064]. See n. 4, below, for information about ordering CMF materials.)

² There are different schools of presuppositional apologetics. For some, presuppositions are hypotheses that must pass certain tests of coherency (e.g., Francis Schaeffer and E.J. Carnell); others understand them as "axioms" that are assumed but not provable (e.g., Gordon Clark and Alvin Plantinga). Ligonier critiques them all, but sets its aim mainly on the unique presuppositionalism of Dr. Cornelius Van Til. According to Dr. Van Til, presuppositions are the basic beliefs that form the "grid" or "worldview" through which we interpret our experience.

came across a couple of recorded debates with the late Van Tillian scholar, Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen.⁴ The first of these, *The Great Debate: Does God Exist?*,⁵ is a formal exchange between

Since we interpret all of our experience through a network of basic beliefs we have about the world, none of us is truly “neutral” and “objective” in how we approach and interpret “facts” and “evidence” we encounter in the world. Indeed, these basic beliefs determine what we accept as “facts” and “evidence” in the first place. Further, Van Til taught that since all worldviews are rooted ultimately in faith—in what is believed about the world—the apologetical encounter involves a clash of entire worldviews, philosophies, or belief systems, and not just the interpretation or acceptance of piecemeal or individual “facts” and “evidences.” Hence, the apologist must eventually demonstrate that any belief system or worldview that is not rooted in Biblical faith must inevitably self-destruct on its own terms since it lacks the necessary foundation by which it can justify or make sense of itself. Van Til’s method has been dubbed “transcendental presuppositionalism” because his basic argument is that the whole of Biblical revelation is the “transcendental,” i.e., that which provides the precondition or foundation for all meaning and rationality. Contrary to the prevalent (and preposterous) falsification that Van Til rejected the use of reasoning, arguments, and evidence for proving God’s existence, Van Til, in actuality, argued that reason itself (as well as every other aspect of human experience) is objective and certain proof for God’s existence. In Van Tillian thought, argumentation and evidence is always presented to the pagan, but always within the conscious context of Biblical presuppositions (beliefs) that stand behind (and not merely alongside of) logic and evidence and which justifies them in the first place. (Note: While the terms “evidentialism” and “presuppositionalism” are useful, they can be misleading in that presuppositionalists appeal to evidence, and evidentialists hold to presuppositions. However, as methodologies, they are antithetical. Anyone who claims that they keep a “balance” between Van Til and evidentialism either does not understand Van Til’s transcendentalism, or is simply not being consistent with it. For, if the Van Tillian employs any arguments or evidences, he offers them not as a “balance” or a “supplement” to the transcendental method of reasoning, but as illustrations of the transcendental method itself. In other words, the Van Tillian presents arguments and evidences transcendently—i.e., in accordance with his precommitment to Biblical revelation as that which provides the foundation for any argumentation or evidence whatsoever.)

³ Sproul, R.C., John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984. The book’s subtitle reads, “... a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics.” In addition, a blurb on the back of the volume states, “[The last part of this book] is given over to a critique of presuppositionalism in apologetics, particularly with reference to the thought of Cornelius Van Til.”

⁴ Greg L. Bahnsen (1948–1995; M.Div., Th.M., Ph.D.), formerly a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, was a philosophy major at Westmont College before earning his doctorate in the field of epistemology at the University of Southern California. Greg also earned his M.Div. and Th.M. degrees simultaneously from Westminster Theological Seminary where, as a student of Dr. Van Til, he occasionally lectured for Van Til during the professor’s absences. Dr. Bahnsen’s encyclopedic arrangement and examination of Van Til’s thought, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, is available from Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company (Phillipsburg, NJ, 1998). Though no longer with us, Dr. Bahnsen’s course materials can be obtained from Covenant Media Foundation (or CMF). Write for a catalog: 4425 Jefferson Ave., Suite 108, Texarkana, AR 71854–1529. Call 870/775–1170. Web: cmfnow.com. Email:

Dr. Bahnsen and the late atheist scholar Dr. Gordon Stein, wherein Dr. Bahnsen utilizes the Van Tillian method of defending the faith. The second of these, the *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate*,⁶ is a friendly yet spirited discussion wherein Bahnsen and R.C. Sproul defend their apologetic methodologies, with Bahnsen defending Van Tillian presuppositionalism over against Sproul's evidential approach.

The Bahnsen/Stein Debate persuaded me that the Van Tillian method of apologetics had a lot more going for it than the Ligonier authors had allowed for. Further, the Bahnsen/Sproul Debate left me convinced that Bahnsen's case for Van Tillianism, at the very least, merited a further hearing. It seemed highly doubtful to me that the Ligonier appraisal of Van Til's method as mere fideism⁷ could be accurate.

After pursuing the matter in greater detail, I was compelled to believe that Van Til's "presuppositional" apologetic is consistent with the testimony of God's Word, and as such, is better suited to a Reformed world and life view. By contrast, the evidentialism of R.C. Sproul appeared more and more to lack consistency with both.⁸ In the following pages, evidence will be presented⁹ to support these convictions.

tapes@cmfnw.com. (All Bahnsen tapes referred to in this paper with numbers [e.g., #ASST] may be purchased via CMF. All Bahnsen papers [e.g., #PA016] may also be purchased via CMF or downloaded free of charge at the CMF website listed above.)

⁵ Audiotape set #ASST.

⁶ Audiotape set #ASM.

⁷ Fideism (literally, "faith-ism") is an arbitrary, irrational, and subjective leap of faith that lacks any cogent arguments or reasons for itself. The "fideist" appeals to his own experience or choice to justify his belief(s), not his intellect. For example: "How do I know that Jesus rose from the grave? Because He lives in my heart," etc. (It is interesting to note that R.C. Sproul has re-defined fideism in such a way so as to bolster his criticism of Van Til and the validity of his own particular apologetic. In an issue of *Christianity Today* [November 4, 1977; Vol. 22, p. 220], Sproul says that "fideism" is utilized when the faith is "defended on grounds other than natural reason.") Labeling Van Til a "fideist" is not unique to R.C. Sproul and Ligonier. Apologists such as Jonathan Gerstner, Norm Geisler and Clark Pinnock have done so, as well.

⁸ I am not alone in my observations. In his review of Dr. Bahnsen's book, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (noted above), Reformed pastor and author G.I. Williamson writes, "I came to study the writings of Van Til while ... a student of ... John Gerstner at Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary. It was Dr. Gerstner's practice to warn us about the apologetics of Van Til. Naturally, that warning induced me to read Van Til for myself... What stands out now, as it did then, was the uncompromising Calvinism of Van Til. Had I not learned from Dr. Gerstner himself that man is, by nature, dead in trespasses and sins? How was it, then, that this 'dead man' could be approached with the Christian faith as if he had the ability to examine and judge the evidence and arguments for it in a fair and objective manner? Let me add that every time I read any of the evidentialists, such as Gerstner and Sproul, I also become more firmly convinced that [Van Til] was right." (Taken from the OPC periodical *New Horizons* in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, February, 1999, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 24.)

⁹ The reader will hopefully forgive the writer for this pun (if not the ones that follow!). As noted above, Van Tillians are forever being accused of negating the use of evidence in their apologetic. For example, in a book endorsed by R.C. Sproul and Rod Rosenblatt (formerly of

Although I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to R.C. Sproul and Ligonier Ministries for initiating me into the Reformed faith, and still highly recommend their theological materials, I am now of the opinion that their evidential apologetic is unbiblical, being semi-Pelagian¹⁰ in nature and therefore inherently antithetical to the Reformed faith at its very foundation. I also believe that what God gave to His church, via Cornelius Van Til, is a profound gift: a Biblically consistent, covenantal apologetic that exposes the folly of unbelief in all of its forms, and which affords an insurmountable defense of the Christian faith.

Written by a layman for laymen, this paper proceeds from the conviction that only a truly Biblical and Reformed epistemology¹¹ (and corresponding apologetic) can tear down the strongholds of what is “falsely called knowledge” and present the Lord Jesus Christ without compromise to all who ask us for a reason for the hope that we have. May God’s people everywhere forsake the folly of any human tradition that is not rooted in Christ and His Word, and submit more perfectly in the use of their minds to His Lordship, for the furtherance of His eternal Kingdom.

Part I: Ligonier & Van Til Clarified & Contrasted

What is the Ligonier apologetic and what are some of its essential differences with the apologetic of Cornelius Van Til?

‘Classical’ Apologetics

In their 1984 book, *Classical Apologetics*, R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley set forth an evidential apologetical method which the Ligonier authors refer to as the traditional,

CURE, now of ACE [Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals]), apologist Dan Story writes, “A presuppositionalist will not attempt to demonstrate [that God exists and the Bible is His Word]; instead he will assume their validity and build on them without ever accepting any challenges against them... the presuppositionalist contends that any attempt to present evidence supporting the truth-value of the gospel is wrong and actually muddies the water of good dialogue between Christians and non-Christians... [Presuppositionalism] assumes the Holy Spirit is unable to minister and convict through Christian evidences.” (*Defending Your Faith: How to Answer the Tough Questions*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1992, pp. 3, 5.) Mr. Story’s profoundly mistaken view is typical of the false witness borne against presuppositional scholars; he not only misrepresents presuppositionalism, he has it completely backwards.

¹⁰In modern times, this particular trend of theological thought is widely expressed in evangelical Arminianism which teaches that fallen humans possess the moral ability to believe savingly into Jesus prior to regeneration. This same moral ability enables unregenerates to reason properly about God and “theologize” without the aid of God’s Word as illuminated by the Holy Spirit. (More on this “natural theology” by the “natural man” later.) Although semi-Pelagianism is rightly renounced by the Ligonier staff as a distortion of the Gospel of Christ, it is nevertheless employed, I believe, in their apologetic.

¹¹By “Reformed epistemology,” I do not mean, of course, what is called Reformed epistemology ala’ Alvin Platinga and others. As stated, I mean “Reformed” as in Biblical epistemology (Sola Scriptura!).

“old Princeton” method which was allegedly¹² used by Princeton Theological Seminary professors of yesteryear, Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield.¹³ This approach is also known as the Aquinas/Butler or Roman Catholic/Arminian method because of its origins in the writings of Roman Catholic theologian/philosopher, Thomas Aquinas¹⁴ and Arminian apologist, Bishop Joseph Butler.¹⁵

“Evidential” apologetics (or evidentialism) is the school of apologetics wherein direct appeals are made to evidence in nature or history to demonstrate the veracity of the Christian faith.

For Sproul and Ligonier, this is a “two-step” process. Simply put, they first appeal to the theistic proofs of the “ontological,”¹⁶ “cosmological,”¹⁷ and “teleological”¹⁸ arguments, calling

¹² I deliberately use the word “allegedly” because I am not convinced that “old Princeton” would have accepted the Ligonier method with all of its tenets as a true representation of its own apologetic.

¹³ Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Benjamin (B.B.) Warfield (1851–1921) were indisputably, giants in the field of Reformed theology. However, in apologetics, Hodge and Warfield both believed that the Bible could be proven to be the inspired Word of God by unaided human reason. It is with this aspect of their teaching ministry that Van Til dogmatically disagreed, classifying their epistemology as “less consistent Calvinism” (see Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 3rd Ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1967, p. 79.)

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) was the most influential Roman Catholic theologian of the medieval church. Seeking to utilize what he considered to be the “commendable” elements of Aristotle’s philosophy, Aquinas became famous for his so-called “Five-Ways” of proving God’s existence from natural revelation and reason (natural theology).

¹⁵ Joseph Butler (1692–1752), an Anglican philosopher, sought to defend Christianity in a society where deism (the belief that God is remote and removed from involvement with His creation) was the pervasive viewpoint. Whereas Aquinas held that reason could not acquiesce to God’s salvific mercy, Butler believed it could, attempting to demonstrate God’s immanence (nearness) by appealing to nature, which he believed revealed both God’s creative and redemptive acts. His famous written work is the *Analogy of Religion*.

¹⁶ The “ontological” argument deals with the nature of being (ontology). The process for this argument is as follows: Since we can conceive of a perfect being, he must exist, else he would not be perfect (assuming that existence is “greater” or “more perfect” than non-existence, which does not necessarily follow given a non-Christian worldview). Therefore, we cannot but conceive of this perfect being—“God.” But why must we assume that “conceiving” of something necessitates its actual existence? Because if it didn’t exist, then it couldn’t be “perfect”? This writer does not find the Ligonier responses to the critiques of this and the other “proofs” at all convincing. (Note: Why do so many Christians find these arguments compelling? Could it be because, as those whose hearts have been regenerated, they are no longer God-haters in their minds [[Romans 1:30](#); [Colossians 1:21](#)] and so are able to reason with Biblical presuppositions about the concepts of “being,” “causality,” and “design” in the first place? I believe so. Problems arise when believers expect pagans to reason with the same redeemed assumptions.)

¹⁷ The “cosmological” proof sets forth the world (or “cosmos”) as an event (or an “effect,” as the Ligonier authors gratuitously assume—more on this later) which was caused by something else. The world’s ultimate cause would have to be itself “uncaused,” or else it is not the “first” or ultimate cause. This ultimate first cause is “God”—who is an uncaused, self-existent

forth evidence from reason and nature that a perfect being who caused and designed the world exists, after which the appeal is made to history (secular and Biblical) to demonstrate that this perfect first cause and designer is none other than Jesus Christ, who demonstrated His divinity (and therefore the “basic” trustworthiness of His Word, the Bible¹⁹) by rising from the dead.

(“necessary”) being who created (or “effected”) the world. But why should we grant that the millions of “effects” in the world (if we grant that there are such things as “effects” in the first place) logically point to just one ultimate cause? Couldn’t there be millions of self-existent causes for these effects? And why couldn’t the universe be its own cause? Moreover, must we assume that something we observe in the world (like “causality”) must also exist outside of the world (like God—the “first cause”)? Why couldn’t “God” (like “causality”) be a part of the world or even the world itself? Van Til’s concern is this: If we grant the concept of “causality” to the pagan as a neutral, brute, uninterpreted, (and therefore non-Christian) “fact” about the world, then we grant him all other facts as “brute” also—subject to the pagan’s own interpretations. Is it consistent (much less Biblical) to assume that the pagan who views “causality” as a non-Christian concept would grant or arrive at Christian conclusions about causality or any other aspect of his experience? (According to Van Til, “facts” are not arrived at one by one, but always in terms of other facts and assumptions about life. If all facts are pre-interpreted ultimately by our most basic presuppositions about the world, no one is ever “neutral” and “objective”—“just following the facts wherever they lead”—much less those who hate God and suppress His truth! There simply is no one fact (or series of facts, for that matter) that is going to change a pagan’s precommitment to his unbelief in God. He needs a complete change of mind [repentance] so that his basic faith commitment is radically altered, and thus the way he reasons about everything.)

¹⁸The “teleological” proof is the argument for the “telos” or “design” of the world. Since we can observe what we call “design” in the universe, such design logically leads us to a designer—God. But would this “designer” have to be the God of Christianity? Why not the god of deism or Islam? And what of the mysterious aspects of the world that appear to be “random” (i.e., without design and purpose)? Ligonier’s response that such phenomena do not rule out the “fact” that there is design or purpose in the world fails to do the Christian worldview justice. It reduces “design” to the level of mere probability—to that which (hopefully!) wins out over “randomness” as the basic telos of the universe. (Note: Ligonier’s solution to this problem is much like their answer to the problem of evil. R.C. Sproul says, “... While we cannot explain the existence of evil, that is no reason for us to disregard the positive evidence for God.” [Sproul, *Objections Answered*, Glendale, CA: Gospel Light Publishing, 1978, pp. 128–29, quoted in Bahnsen, Greg. *Always Ready*. Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1996, pp. 166, 175 n. 2.] Is it an adequate “Christian” philosophy about life that goes to the “raw data” in the cosmos and simply weighs the evidence for “design” over against “chaos,” or “good” over “evil” to determine if design and goodness even exist? Or is it a more Biblical [and therefore a much more adequate] response to say that the very concepts of “design,” “randomness,” “good,” and “evil” are proof for God’s existence, for only upon Christian presuppositions about life do such concepts even make sense in the first place?)

¹⁹Sproul teaches that the highest level of “proof” his apologetic can achieve is that of the “basic” trustworthiness of the Bible—and only certain parts of the Bible at that. (Cf. *Objections Answered*, pp. 26, 31–32.)

In their book (as well as in numerous other books, magazines, tapes, syllabi, etc.²⁰), Sproul and Ligonier rightly insist upon a rational justification for Christianity by which compelling reasons are to be given to substantiate the faith and defend it against any and all forms of unbelief and skepticism.

Reflecting their commitment to reconstruct what they consider to be a “rational” apologetic, the authors maintain throughout their book that two fatal errors to be avoided at all costs are fideism²¹ and circular reasoning,²² since these would spell the deathblow to a reasonable defense of the faith. However, because Cornelius Van Til insisted upon faith in and submission to the authority of God’s Word as the necessary foundation for a rational apologetic (indeed, for rationality itself), the Ligonier authors accuse Van Til of irrational fideism and fallacious circularity.

The Tragic Aberration of a Naked Fideist

In fact, about half of the text of *Classical Apologetics* consists of a diatribe against presuppositionalists in general and Cornelius Van Til in particular. Van Til and others are renounced and even ridiculed by Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley as being (among other things) “naked fideists”²³ whose “glorious” and “divine circle”²⁴ of reasoning is likened to a “pious,” “intellectual halo”²⁵—indeed, “[p]resuppositionalists travel only in the very best circles,” we are told.²⁶

Since, according to the Ligonier authors, presuppositionalists believe that “without knowing everything, one cannot know anything,”²⁷ it follows that they have reason to “glory” in having discovered “the secret of knowledge; the open sesame to all truth.”²⁸

²⁰ Catalogs listing these materials can be obtained from Ligonier Ministries, P.O. Box 547500, Orlando, FL 32854, or call 1-800-435-4343.

²¹ Again, fideism (literally, “faith-ism”) is an arbitrary, irrational, and subjective leap of faith that lacks any cogent arguments or reasons to justify itself.

²² Circular Reasoning is the logical fallacy wherein one’s premises and conclusions are the same. In other words, one argues from his conclusion to his conclusion and so never really proves it, begging the very issue in question. Example: Premise 1: The Bible is the Word of God. Premise 2: Since the Bible is God’s Word, and God cannot lie, its testimony about itself has to be true. Premise 3: The Bible says it is the Word of God. Conclusion: Therefore, the Bible is the Word of God.

²³ P. 318.

²⁴ P. 188.

²⁵ P. 329.

²⁶ P. 188.

²⁷ P. 186. It seems ironic that Ligonier would accuse presuppositionalists of holding to this absurdity when R.C. Sproul himself insisted in his debate with Greg Bahnsen that to know anything with absolute certainty, one would have to be omniscient. This profoundly unbiblical notion is propagated by evidentialists at large who vainly imagine that admitting to probability in their apologetical arguments is the virtue of “humility” since they as mere fallen creatures cannot know anything with absolute certainty and so are just being aware of, and consistent with, this fact. The Biblical answer to this empty conjecture is that it was the insidious pride of the Devil himself who questioned the veracity of God’s Word (cf. [Genesis 3:1-4](#); [2 Corinthians 11:3](#);

Further, when presuppositional apologists insist on starting with the Word of God as the only rational basis for epistemology and argumentation, they are committing a “fundamental absurdity [that] will plague presuppositionalists to the very end” and which will denature “the whole of Reformed theology” which they profess and proclaim.²⁹

Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley bring their critique of presuppositionalism to a climax (and their book to a close) by boasting that their own “[c]lassical apologetic” is “the little child who embarrasses everybody by pointing out the obvious”—that the “Emperor of the Land of Presuppositionalism where Van Til, [John] Frame ... and others live, has no clothes. Van Til is embarrassed,” they write.³⁰

According to Ligonier, not only did Van Til make “the initial mistake” of his long academic career by rejecting the old Aquinas/Butler apologetic as “unbiblical and inadequate,” but his formulation of what he believed to be a truly Reformed and Biblical epistemology turned out instead to be a “tragic aberration which is shaking the very foundations of the Christian religion itself.”³¹

Indeed, for Ligonier, Van Til’s repudiation of Roman Catholic and Arminian apologetics and the propagation of his own particular brand of presuppositionalism was not only a radical “departure from classical Reformed Christianity ... [but was also] a fatal blow to apologetics in particular and classical Christianity in general.”³²

A God Who Is ‘Probably’ There

Obviously zealous to critique and eschew Van Til’s alleged fideism (that “culprit”³³) and circularity (which is “demonstrative evidence of error”³⁴), the Ligonier apologists seek to avoid Van Til’s “mistakes” by insisting upon a linear, line-by-line reconstruction of the “traditional” Aquinas/Butler apologetic, which for them is a “pre-evangelistic”³⁵ enterprise.

[Matthew 4:3](#)) whereas the Spirit-filled Apostles comforted the Church with the full assurance of faith rooted in the absolute, infallible certainty of God’s promises (cf. [Hebrews 10:19–23](#); [2 Peter 1:19](#); [1 John 5:13](#), etc.). The notion that we can only know what the Bible says as “probability” is itself based on autonomous, fallen human reason—for it is a notion that is not only totally foreign to God’s Word, but one that is utterly antithetical to its testimony.

²⁸ P. 186.

²⁹ P. 240.

³⁰ P. 338.

³¹ P. 263.

³² P. 211.

³³ P. 184.

³⁴ P. 318.

³⁵ According to Ligonier, apologetics and evangelism are separate endeavors. Apologetics precede evangelism by demonstrating the intellectual plausibility of the Christian faith and thereby winning the respect of its hearers. Once the Gospel is established through evidences as a viable and therefore competitive option in the market place of ideas, it can be confidently preached. (Popular Southern California evidential apologist Greg Koukl advertises his ministry with this very rhetoric.) Van Til rejected the two-fold dichotomy of “apologetics-as-pre-evangelism.” Instead, Van Til believed that the two efforts were inseparable—evangelism carries its own defense, and the defense of the faith is inherently evangelistic in nature. This is not to say

No faith in the Christian God or Bible is called for at the outset (again, that would be “fideistic” and “circular”), but only the use of bare, unaided human reason to “prove” the existence of a generic, nameless, creator god which is “that than which none greater can be conceived”—the “first cause” and “designer” of the natural world; after which the Bible is used to demonstrate that this anonymous deity is the one revealed therein.³⁶

However, as it has been pointed out elsewhere (by both Christian and non-Christian scholars alike³⁷), this traditional line of argumentation is fraught with logical problems, and, at best, leaves the unbeliever with the mere probability of Christianity’s truth claims. R.C. Sproul has publicly expressed disdain for this probability charge, calling it a “cheap critique” with an “emotive” appeal.³⁸ However, Sproul nevertheless concedes that probability is the best we can do in our “creatureliness.”³⁹

Ligonier’s Fideism

that Van Til confused the two disciplines or viewed apologetics as simply “quoting Scripture,” but rather he believed that the message of the cross carries its own power and defense. No scholar, philosopher, or debater of this age can fight divine wisdom with fallen foolishness (I Corinthians 1:20). (By the way, not only did Van Til reject the idea of evangelism and apologetics as being completely separate endeavors; he also rejected the same notion about teaching theology and doing apologetics. The only real difference between teaching theology and defending the faith, he believed, is the audience. That is, whereas students of theology are usually professing believers, recipients of apologetics are usually unbelievers. To wit, the content of the Bible itself [theology] is explained to both Christians [in the classroom] and to pagans [in the market place]. This distinctive alone sets Van Til’s method apart from both evidentialists [like R.C. Sproul] and other presuppositionalists [such as Francis Schaeffer].)

³⁶ In a Ligonier advertisement for a tape set by Sproul (cf. Ligonier’s 1996 Fall catalog, p. 6), a blurb declares that it contains “an irrefutable argument for the existence of *a* creator God” (emphasis added). (Note: While it is certainly true that “a” creator God exists [and that Calvin himself used this phrase from time to time (e.g. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.3.1, 1.3.3, etc.)], it is not sufficient in apologetics, to set out to “prove” a God to a skeptic who already knows the God but idolatrously allows for the possibility of so many others [or none at all].)

³⁷ Believing scholars such as Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen, Gordon Clark, and Carl F.H. Henry as well as unbelieving scholars including David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Anthony Flew have all pointed out the logical inconsistencies and arbitrariness of these arguments. In any case, all of the technical analysis of these arguments aside, the bottom line is that they are not Biblical, but stem from and rely upon autonomous human reason as they have been historically formulated. Consequently, they are without the authority and backing of God (John 15:5; Colossians 2:8) and never truly get us to the true God in and of themselves, but to merely the probability of something like “theism in general.” (Much like evangelical Arminians who attempt to justify unbiblical methods of evangelism [e.g. “altar calls,” etc.] by citing the positive “results” these methods produce, so evidentialists often cite the positive results they get in using these fallacious arguments. We should not, however, sacrifice fidelity to God and His Word for what passes itself off as “success.”)

³⁸ *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate*.

³⁹ *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate*.

Dr. Greg Bahnsen points out the irony in Ligonier’s charge that Van Til was a “fideist” since Sproul and other evidentialists may be guilty of what has been dubbed as “semifideism”⁴⁰ as they usually conclude their arguments for the mere probability of God’s existence by calling for a subjective leap of faith to complete what their arguments begin. In other words, faith, like “spiritual Spackle,”⁴¹ fills in the cracks that logic and evidence cannot reach; it raises the level of the evidentialist’s arguments from probability to what Sproul calls “practical certainty.”⁴²

Decades before, Van Til himself also classified those who employ an evidentialist approach to apologetics as a “second and less consistent class of fideists.”⁴³ Further, in his recently published Reformed systematic theology, Dr. Robert L. Reymond argues that since the Ligonier authors openly admit that they cannot “be sure” and so must merely assume that “sense experience” is “basically reliable” (a vital aspect of their apologetic—more on this later), the Ligonier men “are placing their faith in an unsubstantiated assumption, and thus reveal their own fideism.”⁴⁴

Faith Precedes Reason

This fideistic, “unproven facts-plus-faith” spin in apologetics reflects the “natural theology” of Thomas Aquinas,⁴⁵ which is so pervasive in modern evangelical and “Reformed” apologetics.⁴⁶ Although astute enough to know that faith is ultimately based on revelation and

⁴⁰ Cf. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*, pp. 76–78. Bahnsen notes that the term “semifideism” was coined by S.A. Matczak in his article “Fideism” in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGrawHill, 1967), 5:908. Says Matczak, “semifideism” is the view “which holds that man reaches truth by reason, but with probability only and not with certitude.” See also Bahnsen’s tape series, *Theistic Proof, Rationality, and Fideism*, noted below.

⁴¹ This “Spackle” analogy is Greg Bahnsen’s. See *Theistic Proof, Rationality, and Fideism*, tape set #ASB, lecture #2.

⁴² *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate*.

⁴³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, (Vol. 6. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978, pp. 34–35).

⁴⁴ Reymond, Robert L. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, p. 142 n. 23). Dr. Reymond refers to *Classical Apologetics*, p. 87, where the Ligonier authors state, “How can we be sure that our senses are even basically reliable and not totally distortive? We cannot. That is why we are left with the common sense necessity of assuming it.” However, there are other philosophers who, through the use of their own “common” sense, reject sense experience as being reliable (which demonstrates that basic presuppositions determine what constitutes “common sense” in the first place)!

⁴⁵ Natural theology, as will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, is the Thomistic, Roman Catholic dogma that unaided human reason can, through the observation of nature, postulate cogent arguments for God and construct a legitimate theology. Naked reason, however, is not sufficient to arrive at redemptive truths about God, so “faith” must take over in order for Christ to be regarded as God’s Son. According to natural theology, then, reason precedes faith and not the other way around.

⁴⁶ Aquinas’ thought (Thomism) and the concept of “natural theology” are found in Reformed literature published by Ligonier and ACE (formerly CURE). It is also found in the apologetical

not reason, Aquinas' famous "five ways" of proving God's existence from reason and nature implies that reason precedes faith. On the other hand, Augustine and Calvin both explicitly held to the Scriptural assertion that faith precedes and undergirds the use of reason (cf. [Proverbs 1:7](#); [Colossians 3:10](#); [2 Timothy 2:25](#))⁴⁷ and so did not teach a "natural theology" in the Thomistic sense.

Following Augustine and Calvin, Van Til sought to hammer out a consistently Biblical and Reformed epistemology, repudiating "probability" argumentation for the faith as a compromise with pagan autonomy.⁴⁸ Accordingly, Dr. Van Til taught that the Christian faith could and must

material of such non-Reformed authors as J.P. Moreland, Norman Geisler, William Lane Craig, Peter Kreeft, Greg Koukl and many others.

⁴⁷ That faith precedes reason is also true for the pagan. The unbeliever's unproven "faith commitment" that the world is meaningful without God is the basic presupposition that undergirds all of his reasoning. The question remains, is this faith commitment rational or irrational? If it is based on the self-attesting authority of God's Word, it is rational ([Proverbs 1:7](#)). If it is based on the arbitrariness and inconsistency of human speculation, it is irrational (See [1 Corinthians 1:20](#) and the whole history of philosophy). (Note: Whether or not this is a conscious faith commitment is, for our present purpose, beside the point, since it is indeed a faith commitment.) Van Til, like Calvin, held to Paul's view that all men instinctively "know" God but suppress that knowledge and, professing themselves to be wise in that sinful suppression, become fools instead (cf. [Romans 1:18–25](#)). The bottom line is, they exchange one belief for another. Van Til's assertion that all men believe in God in one sense and yet don't believe in God in another spurred Greg Bahnsen to write his doctoral dissertation on "self-deception." (Cf. *The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics*, *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 1, Spring 1995. [pp. 1–31] and the tape series, *The Apologetical Implications of Self-Deception* [#ASD4].) According to Bahnsen, unbelievers do not want to believe that they believe in God, and so deceive themselves into believing that they do not believe (when they do). This paradox in Van Til's system has been labeled a bald contradiction by many a critic who accuse Van Til of crass irrationalism in his theology and apologetics. But both Scripture and Calvin teach that there is a "mixture" of faith and unbelief in every man—that all men know God and yet do not know Him (cf. [Romans 1:21](#) ["...knowing the God," lit.]; [2 Thessalonians 1:8](#) ["...those who do not know God..."]; and Calvin's *Institutes* 1.3.1; 3.2.4-5, etc.).

⁴⁸ Autonomy (literally, "self-law" or being a "law unto one's self") is thinking and acting independently of God; it is the assumption that dependence upon God is not necessary for all areas of life. It is the basic stronghold of error in all men universally, and may be said to provide the foundation for the whole domain of sin and selfishness, including sins of the intellect. It was the sin of Eve (and so the first sin of mankind) when she took it upon herself to add to God's Word ([Genesis 3:3](#)). Eve's legalistic addition to God's Word quickly resulted in an antinomian denial of it when, in opposition to what God had revealed, she autonomously speculated that the forbidden fruit was "good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise" ([Genesis 3:6](#)). Indeed, the very nature of her deception was that she could become wise independently or through an agency other than the Word of God. So subtle is this sin, the very moment Eve reasoned about God's creation independently of His Word, she was deceived. Consequently, the Apostle Paul warns the Corinthians, "But I fear that, in the same manner that the serpent deceived Eve by his subtlety, so your minds might be led astray from the simplicity

be defended as an infallible and objective certainty—and thus, was diametrically opposed to “fideism.”

Jesus, the ‘X-File’

For Van Til, not only is a “high degree” of probability the best we get with evidentialism (and how does one rate probability in argumentation, anyway?), the so-called theistic proofs (as they have been traditionally formulated⁴⁹) point to something less and therefore to something other than the God of Holy Scripture.⁵⁰ Further, the textual evidence for the reliability of the Biblical manuscripts and the Biblical “case” for the resurrection of Christ, et al, leave unbelievers with the mere “possibility” of their assertions.

For example, even if the pagan bought the idea of a “first cause” or Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, he is not necessarily compelled to buy into the Christian interpretation of these claims. For the unregenerate, the first cause might be the natural universe itself; the resurrection of Jesus just another example of the bizarre and unexplained phenomena that goes on in the world (such as Bigfoot and the Bermuda Triangle).

The unregenerate could hear the evidentialist’s arguments from logic and sense experience without even becoming conscious of his God-hating presuppositions, much less having had them challenged, for no matter how many facts or how much evidence is given to the pagan, he will always read it through the grid of his unbelieving worldview or philosophy of what constitutes facts, evidence, and legitimate sense experience in the first place.

Given their presuppositions, “rationalists”⁵¹ will demand “logical” explanations, “empiricists”⁵² will “believe it when they see it,” and “naturalists”⁵³ will disregard supernatural explanations for the faith insisting upon natural ones, and so on.⁵⁴

and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:3). Autonomous minds reduce what God has said to a mere “hypothesis” that must pass the test(s) of “reason” (“Indeed, has God said...?” [Genesis 3:2]). Once reduced to this “probability” level, autonomy denies His Word altogether (“You surely will not die!” [Genesis 3:4]). The antidote to this folly is revealed in the last Adam’s active obedience, when He stood uncompromisingly on the Word and thereby overcame Eve’s tempter: “Begone Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only’ ” (Matthew 4:10).

⁴⁹ Greg Bahnsen and John Frame have reconstructed these arguments within a Biblically presuppositional framework so that they do not compromise the testimony of Scripture. Presented this way, the theistic proofs are both valid and powerfully compelling. (See Bahnsen’s lectures in the tape series, *The Philosophy of Christianity*, #ASP, tapes #GB224–GB228.)

⁵⁰ R.C. Sproul disputes the critique that the cosmological argument (for example) sets forth something less than the Biblical God. Sproul argues that the Thomistic proofs say a lot about God’s character—just as Paul teaches that God’s “invisible attributes” of “power and divinity” are revealed through His creation (Romans 1:20). In response to Sproul, we wholeheartedly agree that all men know the living God’s power and divinity through the natural revelation of His creation—but we deny that these attributes are “established” or “proven” by the Thomistic arguments!

⁵¹ Those who hold that all truths are derived from logic and reason (rationalism).

⁵² Those who believe that all knowledge is based on observation (empiricism).

After all, Jesus Christ Himself declared that if people will not listen to the Word of God, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead—as the reactions to Christ’s own post-resurrection appearances clearly demonstrate.⁵⁵

The Apostle Peter wrote by inspiration of Christ’s Spirit that although he had had the glorious “sense experience” of beholding the majesty of Jesus and hearing the voice of God the Father on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Word of Prophecy contained in Scripture was the “more certain” testimony.⁵⁶

Van Til and the Theistic Proofs

Van Til, in keeping with the testimony of Scripture, rejected the theistic proofs and historical arguments as not able to stand on their own. However, he also insisted that they were perfectly valid once they are reconstructed within an all-encompassing Biblical world and life view where logic, causality, design, and sense experience make sense:

I do *not* reject “the theistic proofs” but insist on formulating them in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of Scripture. That is to say, if the theistic proof is constructed as it ought to be constructed, it is *objectively valid*, whatever the attitude of those to whom it comes may be.⁵⁷

In spite of this, the Ligonier authors write, “...what Van Til means by not compromising the doctrine of Scripture is that he does not accept the theistic proofs.”⁵⁸ The authors seem to imply that if Van Til rejects their use of the traditional arguments, he rejects them outright, which not

⁵³ Those who believe that all reality is “material,” or made up of physical matter exclusively (materialism).

⁵⁴ Super-naturalists who believe in a “spirit world” (such as Platonists, Muslims, Mormons, etc.) reason from their controlling assumptions, too, of course. That these pose no greater hazard to the defense of the faith than any so-called “non-religious” worldview stems from the fact that all worldviews are ultimately based on faith. The question is, is it a rational faith or an irrational faith? (This holds true for any aberrational Christian beliefs, as well. Van Til’s apologetic strengthens the believer’s ability to discern and dismantle false doctrines, since any reasoning that is not consistently Biblical is autonomous and must fall by its own arbitrariness and inconsistency.)

⁵⁵ Cf. [Luke 16:13](#); [Matthew 28:17](#).

⁵⁶ [2 Peter 1:19](#). Here Peter speaks of his first hand observation of Christ’s unveiled splendor and the Father’s voice as that which confirmed or made “more certain” the already certain and infallible Word of the in-scripturated Gospel. In other words, Peter’s first hand revelatory experience of God the Father’s voice and God the Son’s transfiguration on the mount did not override or overshadow the previously inspired written revelation in the Bible—but served to corroborate Scripture as that which was already, by itself, “absolute” and “indisputable.” (In contrast to the Apostolic testimony, it is both astonishing and tragic how many people believe that it is their reason or experience that establishes, proves, or even overrides the authority of Scripture!)

⁵⁷ Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, p. 197–98, emphasis added.

⁵⁸ *Classical*, pp. 304–305, emphasis added.

only fails to accurately represent Van Til’s clearly stated position,⁵⁹ but also does not follow logically, either.

Autonomy: A Ladder to God?

For Ligonier, the “fatal blow” to apologetics is what they believe to be Van Til’s fideism and circularity. For Van Til, the disastrous mistake of the traditional method is autonomy. What Van Til rejected about the theistic proofs as they are traditionally formulated is that they bolster the autonomy of human reason—that sinful humans can somehow “reach” God by formulating a “natural theology” based on their alleged “neutral” and “objective” observation of natural revelation apart from submitting to God’s special revelation in Scripture.

Van Til believed that what the Reformed faith teaches about total depravity rules out the possibility of fallen men using their reasoning faculties in a “neutral” manner, since they are ethically opposed to God in every part of their being, including their minds.⁶⁰ This hateful opposition to God actually makes it impossible for them to submit to God’s self-disclosure in nature (natural revelation) since they perpetually twist God’s manifest glory in creation by their idolatrous conceptions and constructions.

A hapless idolater, man does not start out his reasoning in neutral objectivity or blameless ignorance, but in a wholly prejudiced, culpable, willful ignorance. Sinful, unregenerate man begins his reasoning process already knowing the true and living God, but suppresses that truth and exchanges it for a lie, fashioning gods of his own making, after his own likeness, after his own reasoning.

All Knowledge Is Revelational

Unless God grants sinners repentance leading them to the knowledge of the truth, and creates within them new hearts that renounce their stubborn autonomy and that humbly submit to His Word, they will never be able to make sense out of their experience or justify their knowledge about anything.⁶¹

This is because all knowledge comes from God’s revelation of Himself in nature (natural revelation) and in His Word (special revelation).⁶² Further, each mode of revelation supplements the other so that both must be presupposed in order for men to properly understand their experience.

Even prior to the Fall, when Adam could perceive God’s revelation of Himself in creation with pure and sinless eyes, he still needed special revelation from God to properly understand his relationship to God, himself, Eve, the world, and his purpose in the world.⁶³ Further, not only did Adam need God’s Word to rightly understand the creation, but God’s Word only made sense in the context of that natural revelation. Accordingly, natural and special revelation do not function independently, but are integral to each other in God’s plan.

⁵⁹ Van Til’s affirmation of the theistic proofs can be found throughout his writings. See also Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence*, Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980.

⁶⁰ Romans 8:7–8.

⁶¹ 2 Timothy 2:25–26.

⁶² Colossians 3:3; Psalm 19; Proverbs 2:6; 1 Corinthians 4:7, etc.

⁶³ Cf. Genesis 2.

If God's self-disclosure to man via special revelation was necessary for man's proper understanding even prior to the Fall (before sin ever darkened his mind), how much more is God's special revelation (with its redemptive message) expedient for man's proper understanding of his experience in the wake of the Fall now that man lacks the moral ability to rightly interpret and accept what nature continues to disclose to him as divine revelation?⁶⁴ As Calvin puts it, fallen man needs the "spectacles" of Scripture⁶⁵ and the illumination of the Holy Spirit to rightly interpret and truly understand God's "glorious theatre" of creation.⁶⁶

Moreover, according to [Romans 1:18–25](#), God manifests His wrath against sinners who suppress His revelation to them in nature by frustrating their thoughts and reducing their reasoning to rubble. Giving them over to the vain and idolatrous imaginings of their own reprobate minds and foolish hearts, God renders unbelievers irrational in the most fundamental sense about everything (since everything they experience as His creations within the creation is rightly interpreted and therefore properly understood only by means of God's special revelation, which they also reject).

Therefore, since both types of revelation must be presupposed in order for men to make sense of and justify their experience, when Christians attempt to utilize natural revelation alone in order to prove to unbelievers that the Bible is God's Word, they are unwittingly pandering to and even joining unbelievers in their unbiblical irrationalism.⁶⁷

Moreover, not only is it irrational for Christians to attempt to "establish" special revelation via natural revelation; it is immoral, as well. To formulate and utilize arguments for God that are based on our own unaided reasoning powers (which also assume the ability of our sinful hearers to receive them in an unprejudiced and neutral attitude), is to go against what God has revealed in Scripture. It is to practice the very autonomy of the natural man that God condemns in His Word, and is therefore unethical and utterly inconsistent with a Biblical world and life view which must be rooted in that Word. It is to compromise the very faith we are supposed to be defending and is to give away the game at the outset.

The Creator-Creature Distinction

Van Til's rejection of the theistic proofs as they are traditionally formulated, therefore, is not an outright rejection of the proofs themselves (Ligonier's contention notwithstanding), but is a rejection of the autonomous manner in which they are utilized. Van Til affirmed that we cannot justifiably assume the existence of "logic," "causality," "design," and meaningful "sense experience" apart from a Biblical worldview, since it is only by means of God's special revelation that we can make sense of these (or any other) aspect(s) of our experience.

Further, it is foolish and disobedient to take these elements of God's world for granted (refusing to submit ourselves to and give thanks for God's revealing these things to us), while making God Himself "subject" to our speculative inquiries.⁶⁸ It is God who makes the very concepts of speculation and inquiry rational—not our speculations and inquiries that make God

⁶⁴ [2 Corinthians 4:4–5](#).

⁶⁵ Cf. *Institutes* 1.6.1.

⁶⁶ 1.5.8.

⁶⁷ One example of this irrationalism (among many) is the evidentialist's admission that an agnostic "probability" is the best his apologetic can do!

⁶⁸ C.S. Lewis called this "putting God in the dock" (i.e., on trial).

rational. Nor can our autonomous formulations even get us to God, since God must take the initiative and reveal Himself to us if we are going to know anything about Him, so vast is the divide between Creator and creature.

The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel

Van Til believed that for the unbeliever to feel the weight of the Gospel's intellectual challenge,⁶⁹ he must be shown where his unbelieving presuppositions inevitably lead if they are applied consistently—to intellectual futility and utter nonsense.⁷⁰ In other words, since the pagan rejects the triune God as the sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the cosmos and therefore as the source of reality, knowledge, and morality,⁷¹ he is invited by the Christian apologist to explain and then justify what he does believe about the world. Once the pagan expounds his worldview (or what he believes about what is real, how he knows what he knows, and how he thinks he should live his life), the Christian can then draw out the pagan's unbelieving presuppositions to their logical end. With the goal of making the pagan self-conscious of the dialectic tension⁷² in his espoused worldview, the apologist can then challenge the unbeliever to resolve this inner tension.

Because God's curse rests on the pagan's autonomous reasoning, the Christian can rest assured with absolute certainty that the pagan's endeavor to make sense out of his beliefs in the face of their obvious self-refuting contradictions is absolutely impossible since his own non-biblical assumptions about life undermine and contradict the very possibility of rationality and meaningful experience. Indeed, since both modes of God's revelation (in nature and Scripture) are the only means of making sense out of and justifying human experience, the unbeliever's attempt to justify his beliefs apart from God are Sovereignly frustrated and serve only to further manifest the folly of his unbelief.

⁶⁹ In spite of his being fallen, the pagan still retains something of God's image and possesses the knowledge of the true God's existence deep down inside him (the apologist's point of contact!). Also, because of God's common grace, it is possible for the pagan to use his reason and understand the apologetical challenge brought before him. Further, common grace prevents the pagan from consistently carrying out his hateful autonomy to its logical conclusion. Hence, Christians can reason with pagans, and pagans can understand the challenge. Van Til, ever the non-fideist, insisted upon such a rigorous intellectual affront.

⁷⁰ This is answering a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes ([Proverbs 26:4](#)).

⁷¹ Reality (metaphysics), knowledge (epistemology), and morality (ethics) may be said to comprise the whole of a person's worldview, or philosophy of life.

⁷² Or its self-contradiction. For example, the unbeliever may claim that matter is all there is—there are non-physical realities; and yet, he employs non-physical concepts to make this claim and attempts to reason according to non-physical laws of logic. Perhaps he claims there is no design or purpose to existence, the moment is all there is. And yet, his purpose in the discussion is to explain and/or justify his existential worldview. Maybe he says that science, not faith, is the way to true knowledge. But in so saying, he manifests his faith. And so on and on.

Once the Christian succeeds in making the pagan self-conscious of the arbitrariness and inconsistency⁷³ of his professed worldview, the Christian can then ask the pagan, for the sake of argument, to consider whether or not Biblical assumptions do make sense of human experience (including knowledge).⁷⁴

Employing this indirect line of argumentation, the Christian apologist's aim is to demonstrate that the Biblical worldview alone can supply the pagan's missing epistemological foundation—that only upon Biblical presuppositions can any sense be made of the world, including every facet of human experience.

Ultimately, the Christian's apologetical argument is that no other worldview than the Biblical one can provide the precondition for the intelligibility of human experience. The Christian God exists and the Bible is His Word because of the impossibility of the contrary.

The Transcendental Argument

Unlike evidential apologists who argue that Christianity is “more” rational than atheism or a “better” option than its religious competitors,⁷⁵ Van Til insisted that Christianity is the only rational choice for the pagan, for it alone provides us with a cogent explanation of the world. Indeed (and this is the crux of the whole matter): God and His revelation in Scripture is the very precondition for the intelligibility of any and all human experience and knowledge.

This is Van Til's “transcendental argument” by which the Christian faith is given, not an irrational and subjective “defense” from fideism, but a reasoned, objective defense from the impossibility of the contrary; that is, if God is not presupposed in one's thinking, then one cannot prove anything at all; God and His revelation being the foundation (precondition) for the very idea of proof itself.

Anti-theism presupposes theism

Therefore, even the pagan's denial of God's existence affirms it. Or, put more simply, anti-theism presupposes theism, because the denial of God's existence by the anti-theist would not be possible if God did not exist. How so? Because the pagan must utilize God's revelation of Himself in nature in order to do deny that He exists, and he must “borrow” from the very Christian worldview that he opposes in order to argue against it.

To deny the faith, the pagan must unconsciously presuppose the very Christian worldview that he denies. For, without God's gifts of common grace and natural revelation, the pagan would be bereft of the intelligence and knowledge he needs to argue against the Christian faith. Indeed, without them, he could not reason or argue at all. Further and as a result, there is no rational

⁷³ Arbitrariness (making unjustified or unsupported truth claims) and inconsistency (self-contradiction) are the two cardinal sins in philosophy, and they are inevitable when one's beliefs are not self-attesting.

⁷⁴ Obeying the command to not answer a fool according to his folly, lest we be like him (Proverbs 26:5).

⁷⁵ That each worldview has its own “evidence” to support it is utterly unbiblical and misguided. There is no “evidence” for God's non-existence, but all reasoning and evidence is predicated upon the fact that He does exist. Therefore, that there are any “reasons,” “evidences” or any arguments whatsoever is further proof of the Christian's position.

explanation outside of the Biblical worldview for how argumentation is itself possible. No other worldview can justify it.

Therefore, the pagan's argument that the Biblical God does not exist is therefore (A) proof that He does exist and (B) the pagan's own epistemological undoing.

Performing an "internal critique" of the pagan's worldview, the Christian apologist can illustrate the above inescapable and irrefutable fact by utilizing any number of examples from the pagan's own experience.⁷⁶ Sooner or later, the unbeliever must be confronted with the fact that he has nothing going for him metaphysically, epistemologically, or morally, and that God is demanding his complete repentance and absolute surrender, for only in submission to God's special revelation in Scripture can the pagan be delivered from his bondage to utter intellectual futility.⁷⁷

The Gospel offer entails, therefore, not only salvation from the immorality of such sins as fornication and stealing, but also from the immorality of intellectual autonomy—intellectual autonomy that stubbornly refuses to submit to God and His Word.

Granting the Pagan Autonomy

⁷⁶The whole of the pagan's experience reveals God to him and may serve as evidence for the Christian to use against his unbelief. Thus, for Van Til, all of human experience is "common ground." The critical qualifier, however, is that none of this "common" ground is "neutral" ground. None of it can be appealed to in a "neutral" fashion, for this naively ignores the all-pervading antithesis between how the pagan and the Christian interpret their shared experience. The oft-heard critique that Van Til eliminated any "common ground" between the apologist and the unbeliever is utterly unfounded. (A popular Southern California apologist also reasons from what he believes to be "neutral" ground agreed upon by both Christians and non-Christians alike. He rejects Van Til's transcendental argument [that human experience only makes sense within the Christian worldview] because unbelievers do not find that premise "acceptable." But does not the very fact that we are defending our faith in the first place presuppose the unbeliever's rejection of our believing premises? The whole point to Van Til's apologetic is that we are not to forsake our Biblical premises and embrace pagan terms merely because the pagan does not find our Christian convictions "acceptable." If we were to do so, we would be found unfaithful in our witness for Christ and a reproach to the unbeliever—committing the same rational and ethical suicide as he! Instead, we are to obey the command of our God to "set Christ apart as Lord in our hearts" in order to defend our faith [I Peter 3:15]. Apparently, evidentialists would have us submit to the pagan's demands and set Jesus Christ apart as Lord only after we have autonomously "proven" Him, to the pagan's satisfaction, to be Lord! There is no Biblical [or logical] warrant for the dismissal of Van Til's method. (If the transcendental argument is rejected on mere preferential or pragmatic grounds, the Word of God itself has then been replaced by another arbitrary "standard." There is no other legitimate standard open to the Christian, however.)

⁷⁷Positing the following questions can expose the pagan's intellectual futility: How does scientific investigation (which assumes uniformity in nature) make sense in a random universe? Is man truly "free" if he is nothing more than the product of colliding molecules? Why treat people with "dignity" if they are nothing but evolved slime? Etc.

Evidentialism, however, takes the unbeliever's knowledge for granted. It proceeds on the assumption that the pagan's methods of reasoning are valid—he just needs to change his conclusions.⁷⁸ Thus, the evidentialist grants the pagan the “right” to autonomously use God's gifts of logic, induction, and even intelligible speech itself as the tools he needs as a God-hater to deny God's existence in the first place.

In this way, evidentialism not only fails to fully challenge the thinking of the non-Christian, it actually calls for the Christian to compromise the very faith he is supposed to be defending by joining the unbeliever in his autonomous use of reason. Evidentialism assumes that the believer can, along with the unbeliever, autonomously reason on the allegedly “neutral” ground of commonly shared assumptions about the world (e.g., laws of logic, uniformity of nature, ethics, etc.), properly interpret the “facts,” and then reason back to God (the very thing the God hater is unable and unwilling to do!).

The Myth of Neutrality and ‘Brute Facts’

According to Dr. Van Til, however, since God created and sustains every atom in the cosmos and is the source of all knowledge and meaning, no data is “up for grabs” or “neutral” in its meaning, but all facts are pre-interpreted by and find their proper explanation in, God alone. There are no such things as impersonal laws of “logic,” “causality,” or “morality” that are just “out there” existing in God's universe, independently of God; neither are there elements in God's own creation that He has yet to “discover” and to which He is subject.

Consequently, there is no “raw data”—no “brute,” uninterpreted facts that exist independently of other facts or data—since all facts are related to other facts in the whole of God's universe as God has created it. No “knowledge” or “facts” exist in a “vacuum,” but are interrelated to all other facts in God's sovereignly created and providentially sustained cosmos—so that ultimately, all facts are properly understood only as they relate to their Author—God Himself.

If God is not understood as the Author and Original Interpreter of all things, then facts are not truly facts and laws are not really laws—and the unbeliever has no right to claim the existence or the application of anyone of them.⁷⁹ Without God as the “All-Conditioner,”⁸⁰ the

⁷⁸ This reflects the inadequate view of sin's effects on the mind that is so pervasive in today's Arminian/Dispensational evangelicalism—that non-Christians are basically “okay” in the realm of science, logic, and education, they just need to accept Christ as their Savior so they won't continue in spiritual death and wind up in hell. A dispensationalist once told me that unbelievers are darkened and vain in their reasoning about spiritual matters only (which manifests the “sacred/secular” dichotomy of the dispensational worldview). That this fails to do the Biblical doctrine of sin justice is exemplified by such passages as [Ephesians 4:17–18](#), where God declares that pagans “walk” in their vain, sin-darkened mindset, which denotes an all-encompassing, perpetual way of life. Consequently, we maintain that Van Til was Biblically correct to say that unbelieving methods of reasoning about everything—sacred and secular—are just as sinful as unbelieving conclusions because they autonomously assume God's non-existence, refusing to give God His rightful credit as the foundation for all knowledge and predication—and so proceed to reason autonomously about everything else.

⁷⁹ Again, in a “material” universe, how can there be immaterial laws? In a “random” universe, how could such laws be applied?

universe would ultimately be mysterious and unintelligible with no rational explanation or justification at all.

According to the pagan's irrational view of the "mysterious" cosmos, nothing is certain, but anything is possible. Therefore, everything has an "uncertainty" or "probability" factor built into it. Should the Christian tone down the absolutist nature of his apologetic to accommodate the pagan's agnostic, "nobody knows for sure/we can't beg any questions at the outset" mentality, he compromises his faith with the pagan's "random" worldview in which "anything goes" and "nothing is certain."⁸¹

Probability: Providing the Pagan With an Excuse

To present unbelievers with arguments for the mere probability of Christianity's truthfulness is to allow for the probability that it is not true and thus provides unbelievers with the excuse they want and need as God-haters to justify their rejection of the faith and flee from the testimony of God. Indeed, probability arguments flatly contradict God's own declaration that all men are universally "without an excuse" for their unbelief ([Romans 1:20](#)).

R.C. Sproul argues, however, that it is not his apologetic, but Van Til's that provides the pagan with an excuse for rejecting the faith. According to Sproul, the pagan could complain on Judgment Day that he had a good reason to reject the Van Tillian defense of the faith, since it committed the fallacy of circular reasoning and therefore violated "all of the formal canons of logic."⁸²

Circularity: Logically Necessary

Van Til reminds us that when we do apologetics, ultimate truth claims (or worldviews) are basically what are at issue. Consequently, when ultimate truth claims are being proposed and/or defended, circularity is unavoidable since our most basic beliefs are, in the very nature of the case, employed even as they are defended. We cannot but reason from our basic beliefs to our basic beliefs; and this is true for both Christians and non-Christians.

In the apologetical encounter, Christians make the ultimate authority claim that the Biblical God exists, and non-Christians respond by making the ultimate authority claim that He does

⁸⁰ Van Til's term for God used several times in his pamphlet, "Why I Believe in God." Presbyterian & Reformed: Phillipsburg, NJ.

⁸¹ In the pagan's prejudice, he says "anything is possible," and yet he rules out the Christian worldview. He claims that "nothing is certain," and yet professes to "know for sure" that we are wrong.

⁸² *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate* (tape #2). Are the "formal canons of logic" an authority that is higher than God and His Word so that God's Word is "justified" by these "canons"? Sproul's comment manifests his presupposition that whereas "the formal canons of logic" are taken as "self-authenticating" rules in the cosmos—God is an arbitrary assumption unless He is "justified" by them (more on this later). Perhaps our brother means that if God has truly spoken in His Word, it would not violate logic, but comport with it. But we ask in turn, does logic justify the existence of God or does God justify the existence of logic? (Furthermore, Sproul's charge that Van Til's argumentation is fallaciously circular manifests a philosophical naivete' that he later retracted [see below].)

not.⁸³ Therefore, since an ultimate truth claim is basically what is at issue, the question of authority must inevitably come into play.

What is the Christian's "authority" for his truth claim that God exists? What is the non-Christian's "authority" for rejecting that claim? Both sides must present their validating criteria for what they believe about God's existence or non-existence. Ultimately, the validating criteria (authority) that they appeal to must either be self-attesting (needing no other authority to justify itself) or self-refuting (relying upon some other authority [or none at all] for its justification). In any case, the argumentation regarding the question at hand must be either circular (requiring argumentation from one's ultimate authority to one's ultimate authority) or arbitrary and inconsistent (lacking any real authority at all).

For the Christian, his ultimate authority (the Bible) is self-attesting, needing no higher authority to back it up. If the believer appeals to something other than the Bible to validate his belief about the Bible, he has forfeited his ultimate authority—something other than the Bible has now become his ultimate authority (e.g., logic, experience, textual experts, etc.). He must either reason circularly, reasoning from the Bible as his ultimate authority while he argues for the Bible, or he must inevitably forfeit his ultimate authority by appealing to another one, thus refuting his initial "authority." It would be utterly self-contradictory and therefore irrational to make the ultimate truth claim that the Bible is the precondition for any and all knowledge and then proceed to justify this claim by citing another authority!⁸⁴

The same is true for the pagan. If he claims, for example, that observation or sense experience is his criteria for determining whether or not something exists (he must "see" or "experience" something for it to be real)—and then cites something other than sense experience to validate his "authority," he utterly refutes himself. In other words, if he reasons that since he has never actually "seen" or "experienced" God, therefore God does not (or must not) exist—what authority backs up his claim? If he cites observation or sense experience as his authority, he reasons in a circle. If he appeals to, say, a particular empiricist philosopher for his authority, his authority is no longer sense experience, but the empiricist philosopher he appealed to. And so on.

Whether the pagan takes the path of atheism, agnosticism, mysticism, or whatever, the question of authority always comes into play. Whatever he claims as his authority will be what

⁸³ I am aware of the popular atheistic argument that atheism is not the positive belief in God's non-existence, but merely the absence of a belief in Him. Therefore, the atheist reasons that he has no claim or belief to justify or "prove"—the burden of proof rests on the Christian since he is the one making the positive truth claim that God exists. This hypocritical and misleading atheistic argument notwithstanding, the truth is there is no neutrality ("He that is not with Me, is against Me" [Matthew 12:30]) and so unbelievers of all persuasions do in fact reason from non-Biblical beliefs or presuppositions and make positive truth claims about their experience based on these. And so we ask, what is their authority for their unbelieving beliefs? What authority justifies or accounts for what they do believe about the world if God is not the precondition for their metaphysics, epistemology, or ethics?

⁸⁴ By the way, in yet another straw man "critique," the Van Tillian approach is often characterized as offering a bare authority claim (i.e., the Bible is the Word of God)—a claim that any religious group with a "revelation" could use (e.g. Muslims, Mormons, etc.). However, the Van Tillian defense of the faith does not consist in the apologist's claim that the Bible is the Word of God, but in the fact that the content of the Bible itself attests to what the Bible claims to be—the very Word of God.

he reasons from—thus, circularity (or self-refuting regression) is always the result. However, even in his circularity (let us say he reasons from logic to logic), he must run aground into arbitrariness—not being able to provide a foundation for that “authority” and so on.

In the end, the Christian position is that any argumentation not rooted in the self-attesting Word of God will self-destruct in the quagmire of arbitrariness and inconsistency—even if it attempts to reason circularly from an “authority.”⁸⁵ This is because no self-attesting authority exists other than God’s Word. But our present point is this: Apologetical arguments deal with the ultimate truth claim of God’s existence and so must, in the very nature of the case, be circular. An individual’s conviction regarding this issue will always be presupposed even as it is defended.

On that account, circularity is unavoidable, being logically demanded when ultimate truth claims are set forth and defended. The question is, is it a rational circle—attesting to its own authority—or is it an irrational circle—based ultimately upon empty arbitrariness and self-refutation?⁸⁶

Circularity: Ethically Necessary

As noted, it is not only logically impossible for Christians to avoid employing Christian presuppositions even as they reason for them, it is ethically impossible, as well. Since God clearly forbids us in Scripture to reason like the pagan—in an allegedly self-sufficient, autonomous manner,⁸⁷ and commands us instead to pattern our reasoning after His,⁸⁸ all such autonomous and “neutral” reasoning is morally disallowed.

⁸⁵ Sticking with the empiricist illustration, if the pagan cites sense experience as that which justifies his commitment to sense experience as the determining criteria for whether or not something exists, he has reasoned, as we said, circularly. But is sense experience a self-attesting authority for sense experience? When or where did the empiricist experience sense experience as the justifying criteria for all that exists? The empiricist’s truth claim is instantly reduced to rubble. His validating authority—“experience”—proves to be no justification for his truth claim at all, but a study in self-refutation.

⁸⁶ Space will not permit us to delve into a myriad of examples of how Scripture is self-attesting and the pagan’s truth claims are always self-refuting. Nor are numerous examples even necessary—since the transcendental nature of Van Til’s apologetic is not dependent upon or vindicated by the refutation of all the existing variations of unbelief. The argument is the impossibility of the contrary—it is impossible that another worldview could be self-attesting. The ultimate authority, God, has already declared this to be so, and faithfully manifests His veracity in this area by frustrating any unbelieving challenge that we will ever encounter—as long as we remain faithful to His Word. Our defense, however, is not negative only—depending upon the refutation of opposing arguments or competing worldviews—but positively declares that God has provided us with revelation that does furnish the foundation for science, human dignity, and meaningful experience. For more examples of the self-refuting nature of unbelief, the reader is encouraged to check out Greg Bahnsen’s tape series *Faith, Facts & False Worldviews* (#ASC2) or *Practical Apologetics* (#ASC3).

⁸⁷ Proverbs 26:4; Colossians 2:8; Ephesians 4:17ff.

⁸⁸ Romans 12:1–2; 2 Corinthians 10:3–5. We are to be holy in all we do, because God Himself is holy (1 Peter 1:15–16).

God's Word declares itself to be the only legitimate ethical standard for how we should use our minds.

Circularity: Metaphysically Necessary

Further, and even more basic to logic and ethics, is the metaphysical fact that, as God's finite creatures, we are derivative, and as derivative beings, we are not original and creative in our knowledge but are utterly dependent upon God's revelation in nature and His Word for knowledge and rationality. We cannot but rely on what God has revealed to us in order to reason at all. Thus, reasoning from God to God is an inescapable metaphysical necessity, as well.⁸⁹

As derivative creatures, pagans must also derive their knowledge from God, and so must reason from God's revelation to God's revelation, even as they suppress it. Since they depend upon what they deny, and deny what they depend upon, their reasoning is locked in the dialectical tension that serves as their own epistemological undoing. In other words, what they say they believe, and what they actually do, do not comport or harmonize with one another. Pagans are at base, liars and renegades who must "borrow" from God even as they deny Him the credit for what they borrow. This is the pagan's inescapable plight—he also reasons circularly—but in an arbitrary, self-destructive circle.

Circularity: Unavoidable

Therefore, circularity is unavoidable: (A) Logically, since one's basic beliefs are always utilized even as they are defended. (B) Ethically, since Christians are forbidden to reason like pagans, in the attempted autonomy of presupposing God's non-existence in order to argue for His existence, and so must, in obedience to God, begin their reasoning with a precommitment to the Bible as God's Word. (C) Metaphysically, in that all men (Christians and non-Christians alike) are derivative creatures, and so are utterly dependent upon God's revelation for the knowledge that they either defend or suppress.⁹⁰

To Submit or Not to Submit, That Is the Question

Even as unbelievers of all stripes foolishly presuppose the validity of autonomous reason and argue from the epistemological precommitment, so the believer must logically, ethically, and metaphysically presuppose the epistemic Lordship of Christ⁹¹ as He reveals Himself in the Scriptures and argue from that precommitment. The Christian must obediently depend upon the Word of God (thinking God's thoughts after Him) in the full assurance that "God has made foolish the wisdom of this world"⁹² and therefore no unbelieving epistemology or argumentation

⁸⁹ [Romans 11:36](#); [Colossians 1:17](#).

⁹⁰ The circularity of so-called "linear" apologetical arguments is inescapable, as well. We shall explore some of Ligonier's circularity in this paper, but for an interesting discussion of the circularity of J.W. Montgomery's argumentation, see tape #GB213a "Van Til & Montgomery." See also Bahnsen's paper, "A Critique of the Evidentialist Apologetical Method of John Warwick Montgomery," #PA016.

⁹¹ Or Christ's Lordship over the realm of knowledge.

⁹² [1 Corinthians 1:20](#).

could possibly undermine or scale the testimony of God, since there is no higher authority. The Spirit uses the Word to “catch the crafty in his craftiness,”⁹³ to cast down imaginations and every lofty argument that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and to finally bring “every thought into obedience to [the Lordship] of Christ” over every area of life, including knowledge.⁹⁴

Therefore, Van Til’s insistence that the Word of God be presupposed as the Christian’s epistemological foundation is not the arbitrarily fideistic and fallaciously circular argumentation that Sproul and Ligonier has made it out to be, nor does Van Til’s method supply the pagan with an excuse for his rejection of the faith, because Van Til’s presuppositionalism is based upon God’s ultimate, self-attesting truth apart from which nothing can be proven.

Unfortunately (and, as this paper will attempt to demonstrate), it is Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley’s own assumption that God Himself must stand before the bar of human reason and await the verdict on His truth that leads to the same epistemological undoing of arbitrariness and inconsistency that befalls the pagan.

Answering a Fool According to His Folly

The Ligonier apologetic actually weakens the Christian’s testimony in that it: (1) Encourages believers to forsake the epistemic Lordship of Christ for an attempted autonomous use of their reason. (2) Grants the pagan the “right” to his autonomy and the allegedly self-sufficient knowledge and wisdom he possesses as a gift from God. (3) Exalts the intellectual capacity and moral competency of the unregenerate God-hater to the level of fair, openmindedness, and therefore to the assumption of “neutrality” and (4) Reduces the infallible testimony of God to the level of mere probability, thereby providing the sinner with an excuse for his evil unbelief.

In principle, the Ligonier method instructs the believer to “answer a fool according to his (autonomous) folly,” and thus, to “be like him”—robbed of all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge that are hidden in God and in Christ alone.⁹⁵ Ligonier’s evidentialism leaves the pagan “wise in his own eyes”—secure in the presupposition that his autonomy is legitimate—despite the fact that God’s curse rests upon it.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, according to the Ligonier testimony throughout *Classical Apologetics*, it is Cornelius Van Til’s method that is irrational and fallacious, being fideistic and circular, while their own apologetic is the truly Reformed Christian approach that needs to be recovered in order to salvage the apologetical endeavor from the self-destructive errors of presuppositionalism.

Part II: Ligonier’s Apologetical Presuppositions

We have taken a cursory glance at the Ligonier apologetic and some of its essential differences with Van Tillian presuppositionalism, we now come to the second question of our outline: What are the basic assumptions or presuppositions that lay at the root of the Ligonier apologetic?

⁹³ 1 Corinthians 3:19.

⁹⁴ 2 Corinthians 10:5.

⁹⁵ Proverbs 26:4; Colossians 2:3.

⁹⁶ Proverbs 26:5; Jeremiah 17:5.

Natural Theology

As previously noted, evidentialists operate from presuppositions of their own. The Ligonier apologists are certainly no exception to this rule. In fact, the entire edifice of the Ligonier apologetic rests upon a commitment to (1) natural theology and (2) three universal “non-negotiables” without which, no one can rightly reason.⁹⁷ We will first examine “natural theology” and then take a closer look at these three epistemological “necessities.”

According to the *New Dictionary of Theology* (p. 752),

Natural theology is the attempt to attain an understanding of God and his relationship with the universe by means of rational reflection, without appealing to [the] special revelation [of God in Scripture].⁹⁸

The doctrine of natural theology is the basic presupposition of the Ligonier authors’ apologetic and the concept that utterly controls their entire methodology. It is their commitment to this dogma that places them in diametrical opposition to the methodology of Cornelius Van Til (and, in our belief, in diametrical opposition to the Bible and the Reformed faith). Whereas Van Til rejected natural theology in all of its forms as a virtual compromise with the humanism inherent in Roman Catholicism and Arminianism, he readily affirmed natural revelation as the Biblical and Reformed position.⁹⁹

The Biblical Doctrine of Natural Revelation

In natural revelation¹⁰⁰ (as opposed to natural theology), God reveals Himself to all men through the objective data of creation. Since man himself is a creation of God and bears God’s

⁹⁷ These are the law of noncontradiction, causality, and the basic reliability of sense perception.

⁹⁸ Ferguson, Sinclair B., David F. Wright, J.I. Packer., eds. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988.

⁹⁹ Roman Catholic and Arminian theologies are inherently humanistic in that both systems assume and therefore interpose the ultimate autonomy of human “free will” upon the sovereignty of God. God is said to be “sovereign,” but He cannot override human will and be “just.” Therefore, a “neutral” realm exists in creation in which God is not fully in control and man is not utterly dependent upon God. With this presupposition firmly imbedded in Roman and Arminian theology, it is no wonder that what follows is the apologetical assumption that the veracity of God’s revelation must submit to and be determined by autonomous human reason which constructs arguments for God and then “sovereignly” determines whether or not He exists. Autonomy must defend what autonomy creates, and this is the inescapable plight and curse of all humanistic religions and philosophies. Further, Roman Catholics and Arminians assume that fallen God-haters are not completely under the bondage of sin—their “will” being “neutral” and still able to “decide” for Christ in an unredeemed state. This idea of moral ability retained since the Fall spills over into their apologetics also, in that the sinner’s intellect is neutral and morally able to “reason” his way to God apart from special revelation and saving grace.

¹⁰⁰ Natural revelation is also known as general revelation. The terms are synonymous.

image, even his self-knowledge reveals God to him.¹⁰¹ There is nothing that man must do to “gain” this knowledge of God, he must simply be what he is—a creation of God and therefore a display of God’s wisdom.

According to the covenant that He established with Adam, God’s revelation of Himself in nature to all mankind is all His doing and it is utterly inescapable, being “built-in” to man’s own constitution and awareness and manifest throughout the entire created universe. As John Calvin put it, God’s wisdom and handiwork is manifest from the vastness of the starry host to the scantiness of a man’s toenails.¹⁰² It is precisely because of God’s clear and inescapable revelation of Himself in nature in accordance to His covenant with all mankind that God has indicted all men universally as being “without excuse” (or literally, without an apologetic) for their refusal to praise His divine nature and thank Him for His gifts to them in creation ([Romans 1:19–21](#)).

Natural Idolatry

As God-hating covenant-breakers who are helplessly locked in the jaws of total depravity¹⁰³ and whose minds are blinded by the noetic effects of sin,¹⁰⁴ fallen men yet know the true and living God at the very outset of their existence, but suppress and twist that knowledge into idolatry, exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and worshiping the creation rather than the Creator ([Romans 1:25](#)).

Men are not ignorant of the true God’s existence, but instinctively know Him as their covenant Creator and Judge. Thus, there are no genuine atheists or agnostics, but only guilty idolaters who know through natural revelation that their deeds deserve death ([Romans 1:32](#)). Therefore, when the Bible speaks of their “ignorance” (cf. [Acts 17:30](#); [Ephesians 4:18](#)), it speaks of a willful and culpable and therefore damnable ignorance ([2 Peter 3:5](#)).

Because of natural revelation and common grace, fallen men retain the ability to use God’s gift of reason, but they are not rational when they do so. They are self-deceived sinners whose entire world and life view is built on the lie that the God they instinctively and objectively know does not exist. And believing and living a lie is not rational.

Hostile Minds

As haters of God ([Romans 1:30](#)), unregenerate men are enemies of God in their minds ([Romans 1:20](#); [Romans 8:7–8](#); [Colossians 1:21](#)) who cannot receive or understand the things of God’s Spirit through their natural reason—indeed they scorn God’s wisdom and consider it foolishness ([1 Corinthians 1:18, 21, 2:14](#)). Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and fools despise wisdom and instruction ([Proverbs 1:7](#)), unregenerate and God-hating men are therefore fools for excluding God in their thought processes ([Psalm 53:1](#); [Romans 1:22](#)) and thereby manifest a hatred for true knowledge itself ([Proverbs 1:29](#)).

¹⁰¹ At the very outset of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin says that man’s self-knowledge and his knowledge of God as Creator are “joined together by many bonds.” “No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God ... indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God,” he writes (1.1.1).

¹⁰² *Institutes*, 1.5.2–4.

¹⁰³ The corruption of sin that pervades their entire being.

¹⁰⁴ The corruption of their minds by sin, particularly.

In accordance to their profession of unbelief, the entire world and life view of the unregenerate is rooted in the vain philosophy and empty deception of this present evil age ([Colossians 2:8](#); [Galatians 1:4](#); [1 John 5:19](#); [Revelation 12:9](#)), and not in Jesus Christ, who is the source of all true wisdom and knowledge ([Colossians 2:3](#)). With their minds darkened by sin and their reasoning rendered futile by means of God’s righteous judgment upon them ([Romans 1:18–21](#); [Ephesians 4:18](#)), the pagan’s thinking results in what is “falsely called knowledge” ([1 Timothy 6:20](#)) since it is utterly bereft of any sound reasons or valid justification for itself.

Instead of being patterned after the special revelation in God’s Word to submit to Him in worship as the reasonable response to God’s mercy ([Romans 12:1–2](#)), the pagan’s vain, darkened, rebellious thinking constantly suppresses the truth of God as it is also revealed in nature, and so will never lead him to a proper (i.e., God honoring and coherent) understanding of the truth ([2 Timothy 3:7](#)). Unless God sovereignly grants him repentance (literally, a change of mind) unto a knowledge of the truth ([2 Timothy 2:25](#)), the pagan’s hatred of God and therefore of true knowledge will continue unabated.

The Mind of Christ

As asserted previously, the Christian is forbidden to utilize the unbeliever’s autonomous methods of reasoning in all areas of his life ([Colossians 2:8](#); [Ephesians 4:17](#)) but is instead obliged to obey God’s command to glorify God in his thinking ([Matthew 22:37](#); [1 Peter 1:15](#); [1 Corinthians 10:31](#)). Equipped by the Word to properly carry out the apologetic task ([2 Timothy 3:16–17](#)), the believer’s own thinking must be taken captive to obey Christ ([2 Corinthians 10:5](#)) for, unless the Christian’s own stronghold of autonomy is cast down and destroyed, how will he be able to truly challenge the pagan’s ([Joshua 1:8](#); [6:18](#))?

God Himself has sovereignly imposed enmity between his children and the children of the devil ([Genesis 3:15](#)) and we are not permitted to pretend that “neutrality” exists between us. We are instead called to be set apart from the devil’s offspring through the truth ([John 17:17](#))—the truth that they hate, suppress, and perpetually pervert. God’s children are to take an unyielding stand in the truth ([Ephesians 6:13](#)) and refuse to answer unbelieving fools according to their folly, lest we erase our distinctiveness and end up like them, in the same sinking ship of autonomy ([Proverbs 26:4](#)).

All of this being the case, how is it that we as Christian apologists could ever suppose that unbelievers could, in an objective and neutral fashion, infer truths about God from nature and construct a “natural theology,” when the Bible says that unbelievers already know God from natural revelation but perpetually suppress that truth in willful defiance—being unable and unwilling to seek after the true knowledge of God ([John 3:20](#); [Romans 3:11](#); [1 Corinthians 2:14](#))?¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ In spite of the Bible’s continuous renunciation of unbelieving thought as sin-darkened and rebellious, evangelical apologists still speak of the sinner’s alleged ability to “think clearly.” For example, popular apologist Greg Koukl (whose “Stand to Reason” ministry publishes a periodical entitled *Clear Thinking*) received a phone call to his radio program wherein the caller asked Koukl how his evidential arguments are supposed to persuade unregenerate God-haters who “despise wisdom and knowledge” ([Proverbs 1:7](#)). Mr. Koukl responded by saying that if unbelievers would just think clearly, they would see the cogency of his arguments and be compelled to believe. Mr. Koukl’s response to the caller manifests a Pelagian influence in his

Sproul Denies Denial

Although R.C. Sproul denies that his apologetic assumes that neutrality exists between Christians and pagans,¹⁰⁶ his commitment to natural theology implicitly betrays that denial and leads to the explicit affirmations of neutrality in Ligonier's book which we shall explore below.

Also, because natural theology (by its very definition) speaks of reasoning about God independently of His Word, the Ligonier apologists are liable to the charge of autonomy despite the fact that they insist they are not reasoning autonomously at all—but are dependent upon the “prior revelation or self-disclosure of God . . . in nature.”¹⁰⁷ As we shall discuss below, this begs the question, but it also leads to confusion, since, later in their book, the authors not only admit to the autonomy charge, they call it a virtue. “We admit the charge of autonomy,” they tell us, “but not its guiltiness. That is, we admit that we begin autonomously [but] autonomy is no sin but a necessity and a virtue.”¹⁰⁸

According to Ligonier, this “autonomy” is a virtue, since it is a logical necessity that one begin with his own powers of reason—i.e., with himself—and this is a painfully obvious fact that an “embarrassed” Van Til had to admit.¹⁰⁹

thinking. When we convey the impression that pagans can “think clearly” about God and His revelation, we are not “thinking clearly” [i.e., Biblically] ourselves. While it is true that Van Til himself taught that if men could reason properly (i.e., in a pre-Fallen manner), they would be instantly driven to recognize their Creator through His creation, he also recognized that the reason we “defend” the faith in the first place is because men are fallen, and as such, are in bondage to “the vanity of their minds, being darkened in their understanding and alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to the hardening of their hearts” (Ephesians 4:17–18) and so are unable and unwilling to “think clearly.” This is one reason why Van Til rejected evidential methodology—it gives too much credit to the natural man—approaching the pagan as if he could reason in a truly objective and unbiased manner.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Frame, John. *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub., p. 5 n. 9.

¹⁰⁷ *Classical*, p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ P. 231.

¹⁰⁹ Ligonier charges Van Til with being “guilty” of the same autonomy as they in that Van Til himself utilized an “argument” and gave “reasons” for believing in God (*Classical Apologetics*, pp. 238–239). Greg Bahnsen replies, “[The Ligonier authors] miss the crucial distinction between arguments that assume and reinforce the rational autonomy of man and arguments that refute or disprove the rational autonomy of man. It is preposterous to declare that Van Til has ‘become a traditionalist’ in apologetics simply because he is found to ‘give a reason for believing’ the Bible!” (Cf. *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 550 n. 65.) Indeed, say the Ligonier authors, Van Til’s argument (that God must be presupposed in order to prove anything) is itself autonomous, since “God does not tell [Van Til] that” (*Classical*, p. 233). However, that it is clearly taught throughout the pages of Scripture that when men forsake the knowledge of God they manifest their foolishness (e.g., Proverbs 1:7; Psalm 14:1; Romans 1:21–22) and that it is impossible for fallen human reason to overcome the wisdom of God in the Gospel, is clear (1 Corinthians 1:29). Indeed, in the latter verse Paul sets forth a primitive model of the transcendental argument when he writes, “So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world’s brilliant debaters? God has made them all look foolish, and has shown their wisdom to be useless nonsense” (1 Corinthians 1:20, New Living Translation). Ligonier

This is a moot point, however. Van Til agreed that the Christian apologist must begin the reasoning process with his own reasoning powers (!)—but that those reasoning powers must immediately be brought into conscious submission to the Lordship of Christ at the very outset of the apologetical endeavor. For Van Til, the apologist’s ability to reason (using logic and predication) is not “self-sufficient” as that which can autonomously formulate arguments and properly decide what is true; rather, reason serves merely as a tool to be used to God’s glory as He is revealed in Scripture. This is what the Ligonier authors not only seem to fail to recognize, but also fail to apply.

The Ligonier authors’ assumption that they are “justified” in their autonomy and that Van Til made an “embarrassing” admission misses the whole point and overlooks the fact that, in their commitment to natural theology—the Ligonier men are guilty of what Van Til regarded as sinful autonomy in that they simply do not submit to God’s Word in their apologetical methodology, plain and simple.

Since autonomy (thinking and acting independently of God’s Word) is condemned in Scripture as idolatry, divination, and deception (2 Samuel 15:23; 2 Corinthians 11:3), it is a serious error to glory in one’s admitted autonomy.

Natural Confusion

Its multitude of problems notwithstanding, perhaps the most frustrating aspect of the Ligonier apologetic is its continual confusion between the concepts of natural revelation and natural theology.¹¹⁰

also charges Van Til with having a “hidden” assumption that is even more basic than his presupposition that God exists—namely, that Van Til possesses the ability to “predicate” or “presuppose” in the first place (*Classical*, p. 233). But does not God grant this ability also? Van Til understood very well that the believer should consciously rely upon and give thanks to God for the ability to reason and predicate—the bottom line in apologetics is therefore: How can pagans reason or predicate if God has not enabled them to do so?

¹¹⁰ According to Sproul, natural revelation “gets through” to the pagan, and thereby results in a natural “knowledge” of God—to wit, a “natural theology.” With this usage of the phrase “natural theology,” I have no problem. The difficulty with Sproul and Ligonier is this: They confuse this definition of natural theology with “natural theology” in the Thomistic sense (which does not signify the instinctive knowledge of God through natural revelation—but the deliberate, discursive, philosophical knowledge of “a” god through the construction of inferences from the pagan’s unaided and therefore autonomous observation of the created order of things). Confusion occurs throughout Sproul’s writings and lectures because he blurs these two meanings of the phrase “natural theology” and so uses the two concepts interchangeably when they are (by his own admission) not the same thing. (Whereas Cornelius Van Til agreed that the revelation of God in nature “gets through” to the pagan so that he is in a constant state of “*GNONTES TON THEON*” (Gr. for “knowing the God” [Romans 1:21]), Dr. Van Til also never lost sight of the fact that, because the pagan perpetually suppresses this knowledge and refuses to retain God in his thinking, this knowledge results in an idolatrous, atheology—and not a natural “theology” in the Thomistic sense. (See also Robert L. Reymond’s *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 137 n. 13, where Dr. Reymond draws these distinctions.)

According to Sproul, since natural revelation “gets through” to the pagan, it results in a “natural knowledge of God,” to wit, a “natural theology.” So far, so good. However, problems abound in Sproul and Ligonier’s teaching when this understanding of “natural theology” is used interchangeably with “natural theology” in the Thomistic sense.

As we have seen, natural revelation and natural theology (in the Thomistic sense) are far from being synonymous terms. Whereas natural revelation is the Biblical teaching that God has made Himself known to all men instinctively and objectively at the very outset of their existence through what He has made; Thomistic natural theology is the Roman Catholic dogma that men can respond to natural revelation by reasoning to God from nature, independently of Scripture.¹¹¹

The Ligonier authors even underscore what they (rightly) label as the “crucial difference” between the two concepts, namely, that “[n]atural revelation refers to an activity of God,” while “[n]atural theology refers to a human activity,”¹¹² but then proceed to jumble the two concepts throughout their book, tapes, syllabi and lectures. Notice how the terms are used interchangeably in this sampling from *Classical Apologetics* (pp. 46–47):

The *revelation* of God in nature is mediate ... the *revelation* of God in nature is “immediate” with respect to time ... mediate natural *theology* is so “immediately” recognizable... We read that natural *theology* is repressed. (Emphasis added).

Paul—the Thomist?

As a result of confusing natural revelation with natural theology (and vice versa), Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley come to the above conclusion that the Bible teaches in Romans chapter 1 that “natural theology is repressed” by unregenerates. Reading into the text, the Ligonier apologists import their basic presupposition of Thomistic natural theology to Holy Scripture, claiming that the apostle Paul had “theistic arguments” in mind. They write:

... if [unbelievers] are inexcusable, as Paul plainly insists that they are, then the apostle must have thought that the visible things demonstrate clearly that God is God... In short, if non worshipers of God are inexcusable, then they must be resisting *irrefutable arguments*.¹¹³

Is Paul really saying in [Romans 1:20](#) that all men are universally resisting irrefutable arguments for God’s existence or is he teaching rather that all men everywhere are perpetually in contact with inescapable revelation? We affirm the latter!

¹¹¹ Since the distinction I am making between these two terms in this paper is not expedient for their academic purposes, some scholars use both expressions interchangeably because they attach the same meaning to them (usually natural revelation). However, in the case of the Ligonier apologists, the two terms are used interchangeably even when their meanings are understood as being different (i.e., natural revelation and natural theology in the Thomistic sense), which signifies (at best) a jumbling of the two concepts involved, or (at worst), careless scholarship. My point in this context is this: when I stress the differences between the two terms, I am not indulging in a mere semantical exercise over words, but over the specific, historical definitions and therefore meanings of the words in discussion.

¹¹² P. 26.

¹¹³ P. 129, italics added.

Indeed, it is precisely because “natural theology refers to human activity ... [and] involves the human subject’s apprehension and appropriation of natural revelation”¹¹⁴ that it must be rejected on Scriptural grounds since, according to the Bible, men cannot and will not apprehend or appropriate for themselves any natural “theology,” but rather construct for themselves natural idolatry instead. And, as noted, idolatry may be what arguments from natural theology unwittingly construct, as well.¹¹⁵

In Search of Consistency

Essential elements of Van Til’s apologetic are the absolute ethical imperative to submit our thoughts and reasoning to the Lordship of Christ as He is revealed in the Bible and the antithesis between believing and unbelieving thought. In utter contrast, the “natural theology” of the Ligonier authors presupposes that Christian men are intellectually capable and ethically responsible to defend the Christian faith apart from the Holy Scriptures, and that the reasoning process of unregenerate sinners is morally neutral and open to the existence of God!

Lest the reader think we have gone overboard in our estimation of the evidentialist’s methodology, the Ligonier authors go so far as to say that the sinner does not consciously hate and assert his rebellious autonomy against an initially known God—for the unbelieving sinner does not even know there is a God. Again, confusion abounds in *Classical Apologetics*, for the authors sometimes correctly assert that unbelievers do know God but suppress that truth.¹¹⁶

In other places, however, this is flatly denied:

... people do not necessarily consider themselves in opposition to God, whose existence they do not even know at the outset. They do not necessarily deny the divine being as Van Til insists they do. People do not assert their autonomy against an initially known God as Van Til insists they do. They simply operate according to human nature.¹¹⁷

Here the Ligonier authors, despite their Reformed theology, display an attitude which is typical of Roman Catholic and Arminian evidentialists: they assert that unbelievers are morally “neutral” in their disposition and reasoning when it comes to God and that they are not rebellious God-haters in their minds. Say the authors:

We think it correct to say that theistic argumentation assumes the neutrality of the mind in the sense that the mind is an instrument which does not feel but cogitates.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ P. 26.

¹¹⁵ It comes as no surprise that pantheists, deists, and Muslims have used the “theistic proofs” to justify their own pagan idolatry. (Popular Christian apologist Greg Koukl uses the Muslim version of the cosmological argument to prove the “Biblical” God.)

¹¹⁶ Cf. pp. 39ff, 219, 244, 266, etc.

¹¹⁷ P. 233, emphasis added.

¹¹⁸ P. 257, emphasis added. How professors of Reformed theology could say this and mean it is bewildering. Further, after his assertion of the natural man’s “neutrality,” Sproul goes on to deny that he espouses neutrality in his apologetic (see Sproul’s comment in John Frame, for example [cf. n. 103, above]). (More on Sproul’s theory that the pagan’s mind is neutral while his heart is depraved below.)

It comes as no surprise that they must wax inconsistent with their Reformed theology in order to defend their eminently non-Reformed epistemology! The “Emperor’s new clothes” analogy¹¹⁹ that they use against Van Til may be more suited to their own inconsistency on this matter.

How to Not Reason Like a Christian

According to the Ligonier apologists, pagan methods of reasoning are not only considered innocent and legitimate, they are consciously utilized as the only valid means of defending the faith.

For example, R.C. Sproul’s late mentor, Dr. John Gerstner (who had, according to Sproul, “distinguished himself [as the] leading exponent of natural theology in the world”¹²⁰), put it this way before engaging in the cosmological argument:

Though I’m a Christian, *I’m not reasoning as a Christian... I’m endeavoring not to reason as a Christian* and not be any questions... I’m not assuming anything because I do have a conviction about what the outcome must necessarily be.¹²¹

In the name of neutrality and the avoidance of question-begging, Dr. Gerstner here “endeavors” to utilize unbelieving methods of reasoning, presupposing anti-theism as a valid starting point from which to argue for theism. In commenting upon this approach, R.C. Sproul has said that this is an attempt to “beat the pagan at his own game in his own backyard.”¹²² But we ask him in turn, why play the pagan’s game?

How to Assume Neutrality

For Ligonier then, the initial goal in the apologetical task is to determine what assumptions about knowledge are common to both believers and unbelievers alike and to use those assumptions as the apologetical starting point. Common (and allegedly “neutral”) ground must be established first, whereupon we not only can reason together with unbelievers—but employ their unbelieving methods of reasoning to defend our faith.

In seeking to establish this common ground, the Ligonier men admit to a kind of “transcendental” reasoning of their own, where the question is asked, “What are the assumptions necessary for life and knowledge to be possible?”¹²³ Their conclusion is that common ground must be established upon these three “universal” and “non-negotiable” givens: The law of noncontradiction, the law of causality, and the basic reliability of sense experience.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Ligonier’s aforementioned metaphor in *Classical Apologetics*, p. 338.

¹²⁰ R.C. Sproul, “Aquinas.” From audiotope series *History of Philosophy*, Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, vol. 1, tape #5.

¹²¹ “The Starter Exists,” tape #3, message #6, from the Ligonier series, *Handout Apologetics*. Emphasis implied in original. In this same series of lectures, Dr. Gerstner includes a brief disclaimer about Van Til that, despite his having studied under Van Til, badly misrepresents Van Til’s apologetic.

¹²² *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate*.

¹²³ P. 72.

¹²⁴ P. 72.

According to Ligonier, each of these assumptions are common to all men, they are neutral, and they must be assumed simply on their own merits in order for reasoning to be possible. We are told that the law of noncontradiction is “neutral with respect to content” which, by itself, “carries no brief for or against theism.”¹²⁵ An extension of the law of noncontradiction, the law of causality is also “self-evident.”¹²⁶ Finally, the basic reliability of sense perception is a “common sense necessity” which “must be a working presupposition if knowledge of the external world is to be possible.”¹²⁷

Following Aquinas, Butler, and the apologists of Princeton, Ligonier asserts that these three universal invariants are the brute, uninterpreted facts that constitute the basic building blocks upon which the “compelling” evidence for the truthfulness of the Christian faith can be stacked. They are the Ligonier presuppositions which are rooted in natural theology.

Three Things That Are More Certain Than God

However, it must be pointed out that Ligonier builds its argumentation for the existence of God upon assumptions that are presupposed as being more reliable and certain than the existence of the Christian God—after all, these principles are regarded as “self-evident,” whereas the existence of God has to be proved (or at least shown to be very probable)!

Also, how did Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley arrive at these three universal invariants as their “transcendental” foundation or “precondition for knowledge” in the first place? Was it through the universal invariants themselves (as being “self-evident”)? If so, Ligonier is guilty of the same sort of transcendental “circularity” as Van Til—arguing from their epistemological beliefs to their epistemological beliefs. If they arrived at their “transcendental” starting point of the universal invariants through some other transcendental (i.e., something that stands behind them and gives them meaning), then they have forfeited their “transcendental” for another and have negotiated their non-negotiables. If that other transcendental is human reason itself (which they admit they assume to be “provisionally ultimate”—see p. 331), then they are justly charged with sinful autonomy. If they object that their ultimate transcendental is God’s revelation (in nature), then they have unwittingly deemed Van Til’s revelational epistemology as being valid and have rendered a good deal of their critique of Van Til void—refuting themselves.

In fairness to Ligonier, they do state that in setting forth these three prerequisites for knowledge, they “... are not seeking ... to construct or reconstruct an *entire* epistemology, but are seeking shared or common assumptions between theist and non theist” and God and His revelation is not a common assumption.¹²⁸ Furthermore, our authors believe that using God and His revelation as their starting point would be committing what they consider to be Van Til’s mistake of starting with *ontology* (what ultimately exists) to get to *epistemology* (how we know what we know)—it would make “God a question-begging first principle of epistemology.”¹²⁹

¹²⁵ P. 73.

¹²⁶ P. 83.

¹²⁷ P. 87.

¹²⁸ P. 71, emphasis added.

¹²⁹ P. 89. That Van Til allegedly “confused” ontology with epistemology is a common objection raised by his critics. However, that a philosopher of Van Til’s stature would commit the blunder of a first semester philosophy student seems incredulous. Notwithstanding, Van Til did consciously involve his ontological or metaphysical beliefs in the formation of his

We detect at least five mistakes in this line of reasoning, however.

First, Van Til’s “starting point” was in fact epistemological, for he began his defense of the faith asking the very same epistemological question as our Ligonier apologists (i.e., “what is the precondition for knowledge?”) but whereas Van Til answered this question with God Himself and His revelation (natural revelation properly interpreted by special revelation), the Ligonier authors answer with their three universal non-negotiables.

Secondly, they again commit the theological error of asserting that the existence of the true God is not already known by all men in the first place whereas the Bible clearly teaches that He is ([Romans 1:21](#)).

Third, the Ligonier men seem to merely assume the validity of human reason since they start where the pagan does—taking the veracity of human reason itself for granted on its own terms. Again, this is their fundamental (and fatal) philosophical mistake.

Fourth, even if Van Til did “start” with ontology to get to his epistemology (a rather ambiguous idea in itself), exactly how does this constitute an “error”? That Van Til “blundered” here is not only an arbitrary assumption on the part of the Ligonier authors, but is a “mistake” that they are “guilty” of, as well (see next point).¹³⁰

Fifth, have the Ligonier apologists avoided what they refer to as Van Til’s “question-begging first principle of epistemology”—that God exists and the Bible is His revelation? Have they not assumed the ontological existence of God in their assertion that nature is His revelation (and, as such, serves as the basis for their epistemology)? Indeed, they have.

Perhaps they would respond by saying that human reason (and not the Bible) determined that nature is a revelation of God. Therefore, they are not guilty of reasoning in a circle from God to God (ala’ Van Til), but from human reason to God.

Our objection is that even this constitutes circularity and not genuine “linear” argumentation—since they argued from human reason (just like pagans) to a God that human reason reasoned to exist. In other words, they begin with human reason and determine that there is a God. But they do this purely by human reason. Therefore, human reason determined that the God that human reason reasoned, exists. This is circularity—arguing from reason to reason, all the while asserting their alleged “neutrality” and “non-circularity.”

epistemology, for he believed that it was impossible not to do so. In accordance with his view that a person’s philosophy or worldview is a “network” or “web” of beliefs that are all related to one another, Van Til did not believe that individual aspects of a worldview could be divided up into neat and tidy “segments” which are unaffected by the others (e.g., ontology-epistemology, analytic knowledge-synthetic knowledge, etc.). Therefore, what a person believes about “reality” (or metaphysics) will indubitably shape what he believes about “knowledge” (epistemology). That Van Til made a “mistake” by basing his epistemology on ontology is a dubious charge, indeed, and is a “blunder” that is (inevitably) made by those who accuse him of such. Read on.

¹³⁰ David Wolfe, in *Epistemology: The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982, p. 57), remarks: “Truth claims always involve at least implicit metaphysical assumptions, even when the one who makes them explicitly denies the possibility of metaphysics. The alternative to explicit metaphysics is not neutrality or not metaphysics, but a naïve and unexamined metaphysics.” (Quoted in Carl F.H. Henry, *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief*, pp. 85–86, Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books [a subsidiary of Good News Publishers].)

Making ‘Progress’ or Leading the Pagan Astray?

The Ligonier apologists might respond to our charge that they argue in a circle (from reason to reason) by saying that even if they were guilty of circularity in this sense, at least they have made progress. In starting with reason at least they concluded with something not found in their point of departure—namely, that God exists.¹³¹

Nevertheless, is arriving at the probable existence of a “first cause” through natural reason really “progress”? We think not. It is highly doubtful that the evidential argument for “a” god is progress when, according to Scripture, men already know the true and living God but barter that knowledge for idolatry. As Van Tillian apologist Richard Pratt put it, “To try to convince the unbeliever of the existence of a god of some undefined character ... is to lead him away from what true knowledge of God of Scripture he already has.”¹³²

“... [I]f men were taught only by nature,” writes Calvin, “they would hold to nothing certain for clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles so as to worship an unknown god.”¹³³ Indeed, the “unknown god” of the ancient Greeks (cf. [Acts 17:23](#)) could fit the bill of the theistic proofs—and that’s the best that natural reason can do.

God Before the Bar of Human Reason

Indeed, our authors all but plainly state that human reason itself must be the ultimate criteria for determining what constitutes truth from God, “... we cannot recognize the revelation as revelation unless we have principles by means of which we can conceive that it is a revelation.”¹³⁴ But from where do we get these “determining principles”? By our own autonomous doing? Or by submitting to the revelation itself as the ultimate criterion? Circularity is unavoidable. The question therefore is: What circle do we want to be in—our own or God’s?

According to Ligonier, even God’s special revelation in Scripture must pass the bar of human reason before the verdict on its veracity can be reached: “... classical Reformed theologians recognized that the reason must be satisfied before the Bible can be accepted as the Word of God.”¹³⁵ Although it is true that Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield held to this unfortunate position, Van Til repudiated it and stuck with the Reformed commitment to *Sola Scriptura* in his defense of the faith.

Pardon Me, but Your Presuppositions Are Showing

Ligonier’s alleged “non-circular” argumentation is further rendered dubious by their appeal to the Biblical God to identify their “first cause.” Why couldn’t the Koran (for instance) provide their “god” with its name? Also, leaping from the cosmological argument to the New Testament

¹³¹ P. 323.

¹³² Pratt, Richard. *Every Thought Captive*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1979, p. 75.

¹³³ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, 1.5.12. All quotations from Calvin are taken from this edition.

¹³⁴ *Classical*, p. 80.

¹³⁵ P. 319.

could not be the result of any “Christian” presuppositions, could it? If so, why should the pagan be compelled to follow this line of reasoning?

Three Things That Aren’t Certain After All

Getting back to the three allegedly “universal” non-negotiables of logic, causality, and sense experience, it has been noted that philosophers with different epistemological persuasions simply do not agree with one another about what constitutes “logic,” “causality,” and “sense experience” (let alone the massive critiques of David Hume¹³⁶ and Immanuel Kant¹³⁷ on the last two categories).¹³⁸ Says Dr. Greg Bahnsen:

When somebody does a history of philosophy and says, “Everybody agrees with these three laws of thought or to this logical structure,” you can be very sure that they are gerrymandering the evidence. They’re going around picking and choosing what they want.¹³⁹

Bahnsen goes on to mention that 23 centuries of Hindu or Buddhist logic is usually never even mentioned in logic textbooks. More examples are then given of how diverse western

¹³⁶ David Hume (1711–1776) is the English philosopher who declared that “causality” is merely a metaphysical fabrication without any rational justification whatsoever. Immanuel Kant (see next note) later wrote of Hume’s radical skepticism, “[it] awakened me from my dogmatic slumbers.” For Sproul, et al, to label causality a “universal, non-negotiable” that is “true by definition” in the aftermath of Hume is stretching things, to say the least. Should we expect the pagans at the local university to buy into the claim that these assumptions are “universal” and “true by definition”? Do they really constitute “neutral” and “common” ground between believers and unbelievers? Dr. Bahnsen once said that if Ligonier’s three assumptions were universally held and agreed to—why was he wasting time taking graduate courses in philosophy? In other words, it is precisely because there is disagreement among philosophers on these issues that higher courses in epistemology are offered. If everyone agrees on these issues—why go beyond freshman level epistemology and ethics?

¹³⁷ Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is the famous German philosopher who taught that “causality” is something our minds create and impose upon our experience, and this upon our possible experience only; i.e., our experience with things in the physical (phenomenal) world, excluding the supernatural (noumenal) world where God, angels, souls, and the like supposedly “exist.” In other words, Kant believed that causality was not an external, objective “fact” about the world in which we live, but only what our minds presume upon our subjective experience of this world. Further, to apply the abstract notion of causality to something outside the world (like “God,” for instance) or even to the world itself as a whole (which no one could ever experience) would be an absurd impossibility to a Kantian. See also n. 140, below.

¹³⁸ “Common sense realism”—the philosophical commitment that everybody universally agrees about certain aspects of the world (so that they can be taken for granted at the outset)—is a shaky epistemological foundation from which to “prove” the absolute certainty of anything! If different philosophers use “common sense” and wind up with completely different conclusions—just how “common” is their “sense”?

¹³⁹ Bahnsen, Greg. “Cornelius Van Til’s Presuppositional Apologetic,” audiotape series, #ASV, tape #4.

opinions of logic are (not to mention the dozens of schools of logic that are never even brought up by those who attest to logic's universality and invariance). Remarkably, the Ligonier authors admit to the disagreements over these issues throughout the history of philosophy (let alone at the present time), but then quickly pass over these controversies and assert the "universality" of their epistemology anyway.¹⁴⁰

According to Dr. Bahnsen, the Ligonier discussion of the three universal assumptions

... is painfully naïve, interacting with none of the modern epistemological problems surrounding empiricism, induction, or the foundations of science and logic.¹⁴¹

Carl F.H. Henry writes:

[Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley] do not distinguish types of evidence or do justice to presuppositionalists who strenuously insist on a principle of verification and a test of truth. But more damaging to their own view is the fact that they gloss over presuppositions of their own—namely, the law of non-contradiction, the validity of the law of causality, and the basic reliability of sense perception. Closer attention to the first of these principles—that of non-contradiction—would have raised serious questions about the others. The insistence on cause-and-effect relationships in nature, which the authors apparently have in mind, has long been abandoned by many philosophers and scientists in the interest merely of predictable sequences. To affirm that sense perception is basically reliable is unhelpful unless the authors provide a criterion for distinguishing reliable from unreliable sensations.¹⁴²

John Frame remarks:

...it would have been helpful if the Ligonier authors had offered some response to the rather broad range of philosophical opinion... *Classical Apologetics* seems to be written in a curiously pre-Kantian,¹⁴³ pre-Kuhnian¹⁴⁴ context, and thus it strains our credibility. The authors have not dealt with the most serious criticisms of their position.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁰ *Classical*, p. 72.

¹⁴¹ Bahnsen, Greg. "Critique of Classical Apologetics," *Presbyterian Journal*, 44:32 (Dec. 4, 1985). Reprinted as #PA061, available from CMF.

¹⁴² Henry, *Toward a Recovery of Christian Belief*, pp. 83–84.

¹⁴³ I.e., before Immanuel Kant, who theorized that humans do not approach facts and experiences in a truly objective manner, but interpret them via an autonomous, subjective, presuppositional grid that imposes meaning upon them. For Kant, then, the psychological makeup of man is the transcendental or precondition for science. Mr. Frame suggests that for Ligonier to assume that their three "non-negotiables" are "self-evident" in the wake of Kant's watershed ideas is profoundly simplistic and naïve, failing to take seriously one of the greatest epistemological shifts in the history of western philosophy and its ongoing repercussions. (In an article bolstering Ligonier-style apologetics, Jonathan Gerstner rightly teaches that Kantian thought destroys the possibility of true, objective knowledge and so leads to skepticism. Unfortunately, Gerstner echoes Ligonier's naivete when he goes on to make two uninformed errors. First, he claims that presuppositional apologetics (like Van Til's) is itself Kantian in nature and so destroys the possibility of reliable, objective knowledge. Secondly, he asserts that presuppositionalism should be repudiated in favor of an apologetic that is grounded in

In an attempt to justify their commonly negotiated non-negotiable common ground, our authors contend that any denial of their assumptions would have to be “forced and temporary”—that nobody “denies these principles regularly and consistently.”¹⁴⁶ But this is an admission that their undeniable assumptions are denied and that there are philosophers who disagree over these principles.

Furthermore, to accuse someone of negotiating one or more of these principles even as they deny them is (once again) to beg the question—it is to assume that these three assumptions are indeed universal and non-negotiable. But the authors never provide proof that this is the case. Instead, these assumptions are said to be “self-evident” or “true by definition”—and this hardly constitutes proof.¹⁴⁷

Circularity for the Goose ...

universally accepted assumptions that are attainable through human reason by Christians and non-Christians alike. Only in this way, contends Gerstner, can true, objective knowledge be attained and a rational, intellectually compelling apologetic be recovered. Gerstner writes, “This [Kantian] switch to focusing on the subject rather than the object, is the key to contemporary subjectivism in our culture, and also to the methodology of the presuppositional school of apologetics... The classical apologist must fight upstream to reassert the objectivity of truth and the capacity of man to perceive it via reason.” (From “Reason as Starting Point: the Rationality of Classical Apologetics,” *Modern Reformation Magazine*, Vol. 7, No. 1, January/February 1998, p. 19.) In other words, Jonathan Gerstner shares the same burden as did the late John Gerstner and the Ligonier faculty—that presuppositionalism, with its (alleged) idealist, Kantian influence, must be repudiated in favor of an apologetic rooted in the universal assumptions of natural reason.

¹⁴⁴ Referring to Thomas S. Kuhn, the influential scientific philosopher who denied that there are “brute” facts that can be approached independently of an interpretive paradigm or grid of socially accepted ideas. Kuhn’s theories (spelled out in his 1962 work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press) challenged the alleged invariance and objectivity of scientific “fact” and inquiry. Should anybody, in the aftermath of Kuhn, accept Ligonier’s “universally accepted assumptions” as being “objective,” “self-evident,” and “true-by-definition” apart from a working paradigm or worldview in which such things make sense or are even possible?

¹⁴⁵ Frame, John. “The Ligonier Apologetic,” reprinted in *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 229.

¹⁴⁶ *Classical*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁷ Recall Dr. Robert L. Reymond’s assertion that Ligonier manifests its own fideism in holding to the unsubstantiated assumption that sense experience is basically reliable. Also, Dr. Bahnsen points out that in using the “true by definition” argument to substantiate their “proof” from causality (i.e., that “every effect has a cause”), for instance, the Ligonier authors slip into the fallacy of oversimplification. (No one denies that effects have causes—but the issue is whether or not they are “effects” in the first place.) Dr. Bahnsen also points out that professional philosophers who use the theistic proofs would know better than to make “this big of a mistake” (cf. “Critique of Evidentialism and the Traditional Method (Part 2),” tape #GB1065, from the series, Mid-level Course in Apologetics, #ASM).

Finally, for the Ligonier authors to say (in true transcendental fashion) that these three assumptions must be presupposed even when they are denied is itself a circular appeal to justify their assumptions—it is an implied admission that circular reasoning is valid in some cases. (And if, according to Sproul,¹⁴⁸ logic must be employed even while logic is discussed [logically, that is!], then some circular arguments are not fallacious after all, but illustrate the very issue in question—a concept Van Til taught for over four decades!) Unfortunately, this seems to escape the authors altogether. It was even put to R.C. Sproul very clearly and directly in a public debate with Greg Bahnsen years before *Classical Apologetics* was even published, but Sproul apparently never caught on.¹⁴⁹

The Ligonier apologists, as it turns out, are every bit as “fideistic” and “circular” as they have accused Van Til.

All of this casts a dubious shadow over the philosophical expertise and discernment of our authors. In fact, at the time *Classical Apologetics* was written, neither Sproul, Gerstner, nor Lindsley had advanced degrees in philosophy, and only Gerstner had an earned doctorate at all—in church history.¹⁵⁰

Hope for the Future

Things appear to be looking up, however. R.C. Sproul apparently now sees the legitimacy of transcendental argumentation as a non-fallacious method of circular reasoning. Further, after decades of dogmatically asserting the very opposite, Sproul recently said that he no longer believes Van Til’s apologetic to be fideistic.¹⁵¹

In conclusion, however, the presuppositions upon which the Ligonier apologetic is built (natural theology, neutrality, and the three universal assumptions) are dubious at best and self-refuting at worst.

Part III: Is the Ligonier Apologetic ‘Reformed’?

¹⁴⁸ *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate*. Sproul cites Aristotle’s commitment to the “transcendental” nature of logic.

¹⁴⁹ According to Dr. Bahnsen, the next day after his debate with Sproul over apologetical methodology, he and Sproul were engaged in conversation in Bahnsen’s office. In an effort to clear up Sproul’s obvious misunderstanding of Van Til’s apologetic, Greg proceeded to read quote after quote from Van Til’s writings that completely contradicted what Sproul had said about Van Til during their debate, the day before. Sproul purportedly jumped from his seat and, exclaiming his approval of what he was hearing, asked Bahnsen who the author was. Dr. Bahnsen announced that he was reading from Van Til’s books and then showed them to R.C. Despite this, however, Sproul went on to co-author *Classical Apologetics* with Gerstner and Lindsley, which was published seven years later, in 1984. (Recounted by Greg Bahnsen in the lecture, “Lord Over Reasoning,” tape #GB1137 [Side B], from the series “Jesus Is Lord Over All: The Myth of Neutrality,” #ESED.)

¹⁵⁰ Bahnsen, *Critique of Classical Apologetics*.

¹⁵¹ These announcements were made by R.C. during his talk to the Van Til Society at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, CA in January of 1997. Audiotape on file. Dr. Sproul still confuses natural revelation with natural theology, however.

We have explored the differences between Van Til and Ligonier and looked at the presuppositions of Ligonier’s apologetic. Now we ask, Is the Ligonier apologetic consistent with the Reformed faith?

Aquinas: More Calvinistic Than Calvin?

In order to answer the question as to whether or not the apologetic of R.C. Sproul is consistent with the Reformed faith, we will now consider the fact that Sproul and colleagues have consistently and repeatedly espoused a fiercely loyal allegiance to the Roman Catholic theologian/philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Assigning preferential status to Aquinas over St. Augustine as the premiere influence over his apologetic,¹⁵² Sproul heralds St. Thomas as “the greatest Christian thinker in the first two millennia of church history.”¹⁵³ Sproul also insists that a return to Aquinas and his doctrine of natural theology as the basis for “natural law” is one of the greatest needs of the church today.¹⁵⁴

Twice in one lecture, Sproul commends St. Thomas for being “more Calvinistic than Calvin” in Aquinas’ assertion that any and all knowledge is possible only by the grace of God.¹⁵⁵ How Sproul can make this claim (and then emphasize it) is a bewilderment, since Calvin himself teaches repeatedly in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that any and all knowledge—whether of God, history, science, arts, etc.—is from the illumination of the Holy Spirit as a gift from God Himself!¹⁵⁶

Is Natural Theology ‘Protestant’?

In *Classical Apologetics*, the Ligonier commitment to Roman Catholic dogma is underscored as they explain their position on natural theology: “The classical Roman formula for natural

¹⁵² Sproul, “Aquinas.” *History of Philosophy*, tape series, vol.1, tape #5.

¹⁵³ Sproul, R.C. “St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Themes in Apologetics* tape series, vol. 1:B, tape #12, Ligonier Ministries. There is no doubt that Aquinas possessed a tremendous intellect. However, Aquinas’ apologetic, when it compromised with autonomous Aristotelian philosophy is, I believe, the total reversal of Calvin’s. (This is evident in Aquinas’ “Five Ways” which, however inconsistently, assumes that reason precedes faith, whereas in Calvin and Augustine [whom Calvin quoted on the matter], faith precedes knowledge [cf. *Institutes* 1.8.13].)

¹⁵⁴ Sproul, *Crisis of Natural Law*. Ligonier’s Tape of the Month/June 1992. The logical extension of natural theology, “natural law” is the code of ethics which is in accordance to the natural, unregenerate man’s knowledge of right and wrong, which he legislates according to his own moral ability. (While speaking at a conference in Glendale, California, R.C. Sproul was very insistent about this “return to St. Thomas Aquinas and natural theology” as being what Protestant churches really need today. Sproul then emphasized this by exclaiming, “That’s right—you can quote me—this is a Protestant saying this!” [Cf. Greg Bahnsen, “Critique of Evidentialism and the Traditional Method (Part 1),” tape #GB1064, from the Mid-level Course in Apologetics].)

¹⁵⁵ “St. Thomas Aquinas,” *Themes in Apologetics* tape series, vol. 1:B, tape #12.

¹⁵⁶ *Institutes*, 2.2.14-18.

theology, having its roots in Thomas Aquinas, is that natural theology is ‘mediate, analogous, incomplete, but true.’¹⁵⁷

Likewise, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* says:

The first great proponent of a natural theology ... was Thomas Aquinas, the synthesizer of Greek philosophy and the gospel... Nearly all Catholic scholars of natural theology have built upon, refined, or qualified the position first articulated by Thomas.¹⁵⁸

Citing Aquinas repeatedly in their writings and lectures as the father of natural theology and the chief influence on their apologetic, Sproul and colleagues still insist that their allegiance to Thomistic philosophy is a “Protestant” one. This produces scholastic tension, however, when they attempt to trace their apologetical method back to the Protestant Reformation and to John Calvin himself.

Calvin—the Thomist?

Because Calvin teaches that all men have knowledge of God through creation, the Ligonier authors interpret Calvin’s assertion to be an espousal of “natural theology”¹⁵⁹—which again manifests their fundamental mistake of confusing natural revelation with natural theology.

Calvin, however, never quotes medieval Roman Catholic theologians or philosophers to justify or undergird his defense of the faith. Instead, to support his conviction that faith in the God of Scripture must precede proper understanding, Calvin does quote Augustine’s statement that “... godliness and peace of mind must come first if a man is to understand anything of such great matters.”¹⁶⁰ Accordingly, Calvin’s view of “evidences” is that “those who wish to prove to unbelievers that Scripture is the Word of God [through the use of evidential arguments] are acting foolishly, for only by faith can this be known.”¹⁶¹

Rather than holding to a Thomistic, Roman Catholic “natural theology,” Calvin contends that, because of the corruption of sin in our minds, natural revelation alone would lead us into confusion because we are naturally unable to properly discern and interpret it apart from Scripture and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Calvin writes:

... if men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles so as to worship an unknown god [because] ... we lack the natural ability to mount up unto the pure and clear knowledge of God...¹⁶²

In direct opposition to Aquinas and Ligonier who teach that men can rightly discern truths about God from nature apart from Holy Scripture,¹⁶³ and that Scripture “confirms natural

¹⁵⁷ *Classical*, p. 44

¹⁵⁸ Elwell, Walter A., ed. Page 752. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984.

¹⁵⁹ Note the dynamic here: Sproul claims that Aquinas is “more Calvinistic than Calvin”—and that Calvin is Thomistic!

¹⁶⁰ *Institutes*, 1.8.13

¹⁶¹ 1.8.13.

¹⁶² 1.5.12, 15.

¹⁶³ *Classical Apologetics*, p. 27. Cf. *Aquinas on Nature and Grace*, A.M. Fairweather, ed. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, p. 139.

theology,”¹⁶⁴ Calvin teaches that we need the “spectacles” of Scripture to rightly interpret natural revelation,¹⁶⁵ and that natural revelation confirms Scripture.¹⁶⁶

Thus, Ligonier’s “Protestant” commitment to natural theology stands utterly opposed to Calvin on two of the most basic and crucial points of the great Reformer’s epistemology: the natural man’s inability to rightly understand God through nature and the necessity of Scripture to properly interpret natural revelation.

That Calvin’s doctrine of revelation espoused or is even compatible with a Thomistic “natural theology” is a dubious claim.¹⁶⁷

The Self-Attestation of Scripture

Calvin believed that the knowledge of God is an innate awareness in man, so that even self-knowledge presupposes God-knowledge.¹⁶⁸ He believed (as mentioned above), that although all men know God instinctively and objectively through creation, they suppress that knowledge and turn it into idolatry so that they are guilty of “deliberately befudd[ing] themselves” which results in “the blindness of the human mind.”¹⁶⁹

Despite this blindness of the mind by sin, however, God continues to reveal himself inescapably to all mankind through every part of creation but especially through the self-attestation of Holy Scripture which, *in spite of our blindness*, “exhibits fully as clear evidence of *its own truth* as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste.”¹⁷⁰

Thus, for Calvin:

¹⁶⁴ *Classical*, p. 36

¹⁶⁵ *Institutes*, 1.6.1

¹⁶⁶ 1.8.13. Calvin calls evidences from nature “secondary aids,”—i.e., they confirm Scripture. Nowhere does Calvin teach that Scripture confirms “proofs” and/or “evidences” from nature.

¹⁶⁷ Interpreting Calvin through their Thomistic grid, Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley (*Classical*, pp. 202–203) think Calvin sets forth a “cosmological argument” when, in his *Institutes* (1.5.6), Calvin states, “...for he from whom all things draw their origin must be eternal and have beginning from himself.” Far from setting forth anything like a “theistic proof,” however, Calvin is merely stating a Biblical fact: If God is the origin of all things other than Himself, then He Himself must be eternal and therefore self-existent. If Ligonier honestly takes Calvin’s statement to be a cosmological “argument” for God, then, to be consistent, they would have to charge Calvin with circular reasoning (just as they do Van Til)—since Calvin assumes and so argues from his conviction that God is the eternal Creator! (Calvin is not the only Reformed scholar that the Ligonier staff presses into its apologetical mold. Van Tillian apologist Scott Oliphint suggests that John Gerstner went too far in his categorization of Jonathan Edwards as an evidential “rationalist”—that Edwards was a lot more presuppositional than Dr. Gerstner admitted. See Oliphint, Scott. “Jonathan Edwards: Reformed Apologist,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, [57, 1 (Spring 1995), pp. 165–86.]. Obtain from the CRTA website, <http://www.reformed.org/info.html>).

¹⁶⁸ 1.1.1–3, 1.2.2.

¹⁶⁹ 1.4.2, 1.6.12.

¹⁷⁰ 1.7.2, emphasis added.

... the highest proof of Scripture derives in general from the fact that God in person speaks in it... God alone is a fit witness of Himself in His Word... Scripture indeed is *self-authenticated*; hence it is not right to subject it to proof and reasoning.¹⁷¹

Echoing Calvin, the Westminster divines wrote in their Confession of Faith:

The authority of the holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; *but wholly upon God* (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God ... it doth abundantly *evidence itself* to be the Word of God.¹⁷²

Question 4 of the Larger Catechism asks, “How doth it appear that the Scriptures are the Word of God?” It answers:

The Scriptures *manifest themselves* to be the Word of God, by their majesty and purity; by the consent of the parts, and the scope of the whole, which is to give all glory to God; by their light and power to convince and convert sinners, to comfort and build up believers unto salvation: but the Spirit of God bearing witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man is alone able fully to persuade it that they are the very Word of God. (Emphasis added.)

For Calvin and the Westminster divines, then, Scripture is self-attesting; it needs no evidential proofs or props to authenticate it, neither for the regenerate or the unregenerate.¹⁷³ Would that Charles Hodge, Benjamin Warfield, the Ligonier apologists, and professing “Reformed” apologists in general were consistent with Calvin and the Confession on this crucial matter.

Depravity: the ‘Total’ Difference

How can Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley be consistent with the Reformed doctrine of total depravity while insisting that the natural man can properly interpret data from creation? Answer: With difficulty. For example, the Ligonier apologists differ with Calvin in that they reject the Reformer’s “blindfold” analogy (that men walk through creation’s glorious theatre blindfolded

¹⁷¹ 1.7.4-5, emphasis added.

¹⁷² 1.4-5, emphasis added.

¹⁷³ Notice I am not saying that evidence cannot be *edifying* to the saint who already accepts the Bible’s inspiration and authority—neither am I saying that evidence is not needful in apologetical encounters to *confirm* what Scripture says. What I *am* saying is that Calvin, the Westminster Assembly, and Van Til do not believe that evidence *authenticates* or *proves* Scripture to be what it infallibly declares *itself* to be! Please mark this. Further, the Belgic Confession (1618 A.D.) states in Article 5: The Authority of Scripture:

We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith.

And we believe without a doubt all things contained in them—not so much because the church receives and approves them as such but above all because the Holy Spirit testifies in our hearts that they are from God, and also because *they prove themselves* to be from God. (Emphasis added.)

by sin so that they cannot truly see it and appreciate it as such). They insist that unregenerate men can indeed “see” his self-disclosure of God in nature, but they haven’t the “heart” to acknowledge that they see it. They write:

We suggest that classic Reformed orthodoxy saw the noetic influence of sin not as direct through a totally depraved mind, but as *indirect* through the totally depraved heart.¹⁷⁴

The Ligonier “suggestion” above seems to be an attempt to conform the Reformed faith to fit their Thomistic mold. Where in “Reformed orthodoxy” do we find the “heart” and “mind” separate and distinct with respect to the corruption of the Fall? Indeed, “total depravity” (in the Reformed sense) has always meant that every part of man is corrupted with moral inability—with the “noetic influence of sin” emphasizing the moral corruption of the mind itself in particular.

The Westminster Confession states very clearly:

Our first parents . . . fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and *wholly defiled* in *all* the parts and faculties of soul and body . . . From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and *wholly inclined* to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.¹⁷⁵

Ligonier’s neatly packaged division of the “heart” and “mind” in the matter of depravity is a strained attempt to justify their epistemology.

False Antithesis

The Ligonier stance on this matter leads them to the contention that, if the mind itself is directly corrupted by sin’s influence (as opposed to indirectly through the heart, as they argue), then logically, we are driven to the hyper-Calvinistic conclusion that human reason itself has been destroyed by the Fall. In other words, according to Ligonier, either the mind of man is neutral and reliable (being only indirectly influenced by sin), or it has been utterly destroyed (by sin’s direct corruption). The former is the “orthodox” view, while the latter is hyper-Calvinistic error (they say). However, this argument is fallacious, being a false antithesis.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Pp. 243, emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁵ 6:1–4, emphasis added.

¹⁷⁶ The “false antithesis” or “false dilemma” fallacy presents its recipient with a bogus “either/or” decision. Like the (tasteless) joke that takes the form of a question—to wit: Are you still beating your wife? If the answer is “no,” then you used to. If you answer “yes,” then you still are. Either way, you are guilty. In the issue at hand, Ligonier presents its readers with the bogus “either/or” choice of (A) Either the mind of sinful man is neutral and reliable, or (B) It has been utterly destroyed by the Fall. Or, to put it another way, Ligonier contends that (A) Van Til must admit that the mind can reason properly, and thus, he refutes his whole apologetical position, or (B) Van Til espouses the hyper-Calvinist heresy that fallen man cannot reason at all, and so refutes his theology. (At the risk of straying too far afield, the “false antithesis” fallacy is found in contemporary apologetical arguments that posit the following three conclusions about Jesus of Nazareth: Either He was (A) A liar, or (B) A lunatic, or (C) Lord over all. Dr. Bahnsen

Because Van Til believed that if a sinner's God-hating presuppositions were drawn out to their logical conclusion they would lead to the destruction of any and all knowledge whatsoever, the Ligonier authors conclude:

In that case, human mental faculties (not only holiness) have been eradicated by the Fall... the body has somehow survived the Fall, the mind has not. This is a theological error, as well as an apologetic fatality.¹⁷⁷

From this erroneous assumption, the Ligonier men go on to conclude that:

Van Til ... will not allow the noetic influence [of sin] to be an indirect influence through the wicked heart acting upon an instrumental reason. What option has he left except to suppose that the mind itself has been destroyed? ... what option does he have but to say that the effect of the Fall is the obliteration of the functioning mind? That is hyper-Calvinism... Van Til sees the noetic influence as virtually destroying the logical functioning of the mind...¹⁷⁸

This is a misreading of Van Til that leads to yet more confusion, for, after the above assertions, the authors go on to state, "Van Til does not think that human rationality is lost in the Fall."¹⁷⁹

The Rational/Irrational Dilemma: a No-Win Situation

In truth, Van Til affirmed that unregenerate men are able to reason and use logic. At the same time, however, Van Til also emphasized the foundational fact that unregenerates cannot justify or give an account for their use of reason and logic given their unbelieving worldview.¹⁸⁰ They

points out that a philosophically astute and personally tenacious unbeliever does not have to be fazed by this reasoning at all. The pagan could reject all three options as invalid and invent his own! For example, the unbeliever could say that Jesus is none of the above—he was a good man with some good things to say—it was his followers who exaggerated his claims and misconstrued his identity. Utilizing "logic" in accordance with his God-hating presuppositions, the pagan can escape the evidentialists bogus "Liar, Lunatic, or Lord dilemma" utterly unscathed by the evidence. (Cf., Bahnsen, Greg. "Critique of Evidentialism and the Traditional Method (Part 2)," tape #GB1065, from the Mid-level Course in Apologetics.)

¹⁷⁷ P. 213. In a characteristic misapprehension of Van Til, the Ligonier authors confuse the concepts of the sinner's principial destruction of knowledge (i.e., if he were consistent with what he says he believes, he couldn't make sense of anything), with the actual destruction of the sinner's reasoning powers. In so confusing these concepts, Ligonier accuses Van Til of teaching the actual destruction of the mind. (Strangely, however, they go on to admit that Van Til does not teach this!) In a vain attempt to combat Van Til's alleged "mistake," the Ligonier authors are forever emphasizing the ability of fallen angels and humans to use their reasoning ability—as if this somehow exposes folly in Van Til's presuppositionalism and vindicates their rationalistic evidentialism. Their concern is utterly unwarranted, however, since no orthodox theologians deny the ability of Satan or sinners to use their reason—including Van Til.

¹⁷⁸ P. 244–245.

¹⁷⁹ P. 262.

¹⁸⁰ In logic, any knowledge that cannot be justified is false knowledge.

claim the world is material, and yet they think, speak, and act according to abstract categories. They claim the world is random, yet live according to schedules. They claim to be evolved slime, yet crusade for human rights. Their “knowledge” of such things, then, is unjustified; false. They cannot account for what they say and do. They are irrational—even in their attempt to use reason. Their beliefs and their actions do not comport with each other.

As Van Til used to say, “Non-Christians can count very well. But they cannot account for their counting.” This is because “counting” (as a rational activity) does not make sense in a non-Christian worldview—where there is only randomness and chance, where there are no universals—only particulars, etc.

The pagan is locked in an inescapable intellectual dilemma: Either he must stop attempting to be rational (since by attempting to be rational he proves the correctness of the Christian worldview); or he must admit the epistemic Lordship of Christ. Either way, he loses his case.

The Immorality of Self-Deception

Because of the direct and all-pervasive effects of sin, men are self-deceived and are therefore irrational at the very core of their souls ([Jeremiah 17:9](#)), denying the very revelational truth that they utilize and are inescapably in touch with every moment of their lives. In their wickedness, they have deceived themselves into believing that they do not believe in the God that they really do believe in. This is the lie that all unbelievers irrationally use their minds to affirm.

Therefore, the issue is not whether sin has “destroyed” the minds of men or not (Ligonier’s contention notwithstanding), but whether or not sin has destroyed the ethical use of their minds. Ligonier assumes that the ethical and rational aspects of the mind can be separated—as if holiness can be lost while rationality is retained. By contrast, Van Til’s foundational assertion is that unregenerate men are in bondage to sin’s power over their entire being, therefore they cannot ([Romans 8:7–8](#)) and will not ([John 3:20](#)) submit the use of their minds to God’s commandments which are summed up in the ethical imperative to love Him with their whole being, which includes their minds ([Matthew 22:37, 40](#)). As perpetual covenant breakers, sinners use their minds to deny the truth of God as He reveals Himself through nature and Scripture, believing and living the lie that He doesn’t even exist. And again, believing and living a lie is not rational— even if done by monumental intellects.

Therefore, pagans certainly can use their minds. But they are still irrational in that: 1.) They cannot give an account for reason and logic, and 2.) They cannot reason ethically—to the glory of God.

The Ligonier charge that Van Til held to the hyper-Calvinistic notion of the destruction of the mind is utterly groundless. Ironically (and unfortunately), their accusation backfires, since it exposes their own denial of the Reformed doctrines of total depravity and the noetic effects of sin in their apologetical method.

Scripture Alone?

Finally, on the Reformed question, whatever happened to *Sola Scriptura*? Why is it that our Calvinist authors forget about this Reformation essential when it comes to their apologetic? It is because they have taken their cues for argumentation from the unbelieving marketplace instead

of God’s infallible Word. In their zeal to be “classical”¹⁸¹ in their apologetic, they have unwittingly embraced the apostate reasoning of the fools of this age (1 [Corinthians 1:20](#)) instead of the philosophy of Christ ([Colossians 2:8](#)).

Perhaps what we have here is an illustration of the pagan dualism that has found its way into the church via autonomous theologies and ideologies. It is sometimes known as the “sacred vs. secular” dichotomy. Jesus is Lord of theology (the sacred partition of reality), while Reason is Lord over epistemology (the secular division of existence).

According to the Reformed faith and worldview, however, Jesus is Lord over all of creation—sacred and secular. He created our minds and set forth the rules by which they are to be used for the furtherance, glory and exaltation of His Kingdom—the Kingdom by which He rules as the “only Potentate” over all the affairs of men (1 [Timothy 6:16](#)). It is to Him that all men will give an account for how they used their minds—not to the God-haters of this age.

We must conclude that the Ligonier apologetic is not consistent with the Reformed faith in its allegiance to the Roman Catholic dogma of natural theology, its crucial differences with Calvin and the Westminster Confession of Faith on Scripture, total depravity, and the noetic effects of sin, and in its having forsaken the Reformation essential, *Sola Scriptura*, in the formulation of its epistemology and argumentation.

Part IV: Is the Ligonier Apologetic Faithful to the Word of God?

We have looked at some of the differences between Ligonier and Van Til, glanced at the controlling presuppositions that lay beneath Sproul’s apologetic, and considered whether or not Ligonier’s apologetic is consistent with the Reformed faith—we now ask the question, Is the Ligonier apologetic faithful to God’s Word?

Where in the Word Is Natural Theology?

For Ligonier, the “nature” Psalms (e.g., [Psalm 19](#)) teach a natural theology which is made available to all men as it is “mediated” through creation. As we have seen, this is also how they understand [Romans 1:20](#) which says:

For the invisible things of God since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse.¹⁸²

This verse is viewed by Ligonier as the “text of texts” to demonstrate that natural theology is Biblical.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ With respect to philosophical pursuits, the term “classical” usually refers to the ancient Greeks who, according to Paul, sought “after wisdom” but became fools instead (1 [Corinthians 1–2](#)). Sometimes it hearkens back to the Renaissance—when divine revelation was widely rejected as an outdated fantasy and natural human reason was championed as self-sufficient. In any case, it strikes me as peculiar that a Christian ministry would favor this label to designate their intellectual undertakings.

¹⁸² American Standard Version, 1901.

¹⁸³ *Classical*, p. 43.

However, the surrounding context of verse 20 teaches that God has personally made Himself plain to all men, through what He has made—not through any humanly devised “proofs” from logic and history.¹⁸⁴ Also, the passage declares that all men know THE true and living God—not something like “a god” or “theism in general”—e.g., a “first cause,” or “designer.”¹⁸⁵ All men are therefore in rebellion against the God they know—they are not trying to “find” a god they are not even certain exists. And verse 20 declares that all men are “without an excuse” for their alleged agnosticism or uncertainty about God’s existence—which is not at all how the theistic proofs with their “probability” factor and inherent incertitude, renders them.

The Ligonier understanding of [Romans 1](#) is the result of reading their Thomism into the text of Scripture, for it is not found in the words of the Apostle. Nowhere does Scripture teach that God’s holy prophets and apostles went about constructing philosophical “proofs,” “evidences,” or “arguments” for God’s existence based upon their own independent powers of reason or observation. In fact, such reasoning is clearly condemned in Scripture as apostate (cf. [Ephesians 4:17](#); [Colossians 2:8](#); [2 Corinthians 11:3](#)).¹⁸⁶

As stated before, the Bible says that man is just as darkened in his mind ([Romans 1:21](#); [8:7–8](#); [Ephesians 4:18](#)) as he is in his emotions and will ([John 3:20](#); [2 Timothy 2:26](#)). Unregenerate men are God-haters ([Romans 1:30](#)) who cannot understand God or seek after Him ([1 Corinthians 2:14](#); [Romans 3:11](#)).

Pulling together some foregoing observations, we conclude that the Ligonier apologetic is unfaithful to God’s Word in that: (1) It is not built upon a consistent exegesis of the Biblical text, but upon human tradition and the basic principles of this world, rather than on Christ. (2) It denies the Scriptural teaching that men’s minds are just as sinful and darkened as their hearts. (3) It denies the Biblical antithesis between the reason of believers and unbelievers. (4) It negates the Biblical injunction to submit our reason to God’s Word and Christ’s authority and instead submits God’s Word and Christ’s authority to our reason. (5) It presents the special revelation of God as mere “probability” instead of the absolute, infallible certainty that God’s Word declares itself to be, and (6) It does not apply the Lordship of Christ as He is revealed in the Bible to its epistemology and therefore to its method of reasoning for that Lordship.

Thus, the Ligonier apologetic is built upon a foundation that is as unbiblical and unreformed as it is utterly inconsistent with itself; and if the foundation be faulty, then the structure will falter, as well (cf. [Matthew 7:24–27](#)).

¹⁸⁴ [Romans 1:19](#)

¹⁸⁵ [Romans 1:21](#)

¹⁸⁶ Evidentialists commonly appeal to Paul’s Mars Hill message to the Greeks (cf. [Acts 17:16–33](#)) as allegedly justifying an evidentialist methodology in apologetics. But nowhere in this discourse does the Apostle ever forsake a Scriptural foundation and framework for his proclamation of the Gospel and its defense. When Paul quotes the pagan philosophers (v. 28), he does so to demonstrate their innate knowledge of the true God via natural revelation so that the Athenian pagans cannot claim “ignorance” and therefore “innocence” before His Judgment Seat. Further, far from an attempt to “prove” the resurrection, Paul’s was an argument from the fact of the resurrection! In other words, Paul argues that because God has raised Jesus from the dead as proof that He is the rightful and sovereign Judge, they must now repent and believe what His Word has revealed. (For an exegesis of Paul’s entire Athenian sermon, see Greg Bahnsen’s essay, “The Encounter of Jerusalem with Athens.” *Ashland Theological Bulletin*, XIII:1, Spring, 1980. Available as #PA045 from CMF.)

Other Problems

In addition to the scholarly lapses already touched upon in this paper, many more Ligonier fallacies could be cited. For example, they again commit the fallacy of false antithesis when they assert that to reject natural theology is to automatically embrace fideism (p. 27).¹⁸⁷ As noted, they oversimplify the traditional cosmological argument by substituting “effect” for “event” (p. 111). In another misrepresentation, they claim that Van Til followed Kuyper over Warfield (p. 38).¹⁸⁸ Further, they falsely attribute Arminian evidentialist Stuart Hackett’s statement that “the Calvinist cannot give reasons because he has no point of contact with the non-Christian” twice to Van Til,¹⁸⁹ and so on.

¹⁸⁷ In addition, this false antithesis fallacy takes on a guilty-by-association flavor in the *Bahnsen-Sproul Debate*. In his opening statement, Sproul heavily insinuates that since Van Til rejected natural theology, and neo-orthodox theologians (e.g., Karl Barth) also rejected natural theology, therefore Van Til’s rejection of natural theology is neo-orthodox in nature! When questioned on this by the debate moderator, Sproul denies it. Later in the same debate, however, Sproul proceeds to make the very same implication in a question he puts to Bahnsen.

¹⁸⁸ In *Defense of the Faith*, pp. 265–66, Van Til writes, “I have chosen the position of Abraham Kuyper. But I am unable to follow him when ... he concludes to the uselessness of reasoning with the natural man.” Van Til goes on to say, “... Warfield was *quite right* in maintaining that Christianity is objectively defensible. And the natural man has the ability to understand intellectually, though not spiritually, the challenge presented to him” (emphasis added). In other words, Van Til agreed with Kuyper (over against Warfield) that reasoning with the pagan in a “neutral” manner is impossible. Yet Van Til also agreed with Warfield (over against Kuyper) that we can indeed reason with the pagan. So, in truth, Van Til embraced and rejected elements of both Kuyper and Warfield. Ligonier’s implied assertion that Van Til flatly rejected Warfield and wholly embraced Kuyper is a falsehood.

¹⁸⁹ Pp. 214, 216, and compare with p. 16 of *Jerusalem and Athens* (Geehan, E.R., ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) where Van Til is merely quoting Hackett. Concerning this Ligonier error, John Frame writes, “I could write this off as a minor mistake, except that it shows, in its way, an extraordinary ignorance of Van Til’s position... It is hard to account for this sort of blunder except as a serious lapse of scholarship stemming from ignorance and intense prejudice, a desire to make Van Til say something he does not actually say, in order to make him more vulnerable to criticism.” (*Apologetics to the Glory of God*, p. 237). As an aside, Stuart Hackett’s (and Ligonier’s) misinformed view of Van Til is also fostered by Alister E. McGrath in his book, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God & Other Modern Myths*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993). McGrath writes, “Van Til ... declares that the possibility of a dialogue with those outside the Christian faith is excluded. There is no common ground” (P. 218). If this is true, then why did Van Til bother to teach apologetics for over 40 years at Westminster Seminary and write dozens of syllabi, books, pamphlets and tracts about the necessity of defending the faith by means of an irrefutable, objective argument if dialog with pagans is an impossibility? Such extreme misrepresentation of Van Til’s position is utterly fathomless and totally without excuse. Perhaps it is an illustration of Van Til’s thesis itself—that unless one is the recipient of illuminating grace, his own false beliefs will utterly dictate how he looks at the evidence—no matter how overwhelmingly apparent or glaringly “obvious” the facts may appear. We can be thankful to God that R.C. Sproul has recently changed his mind about some of these issues.

Test All Things

In spite of the fine work they have done to advance the cause of Reformed theology, Sproul and Ligonier have set forth an apologetical method which fails to line up with that same Reformed faith. It is a method that contradicts the very essence of Biblical Calvinism.

Further, *Classical Apologetics* is not worthy of Reformed scholarship. Nor does it evidence Christian charity in its false witness and epithets aimed at Van Til and other presuppositional scholars. Although the authors dedicated the work to Cornelius Van Til, it seems to us that they have dedicated it rather to his denunciation. This is highly unfortunate for them and for thinking people everywhere.

Conclusion

We finally conclude that the Ligonier apologetic is theologically and philosophically unsound, being inconsistent with the Reformed faith and unfaithful to God's Word at its very foundation, and therefore should be rejected as such.

What Love Is This? Calvin's Misrepresentation of God A Review By Justin T. Alfred

Introduction

I want to say first of all that this review is not an apology for or against Calvinism, but rather an apology for the integrity of God's Word and the truth contained therein. Neither Calvinism, nor Arminianism, nor any other "ism," nor any one man, nor group of men and their respective teaching is the standard or grid by which we judge the truth of God's Word. God's Word alone is our one and only standard as the Holy Spirit opens to us its "riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God" ([Romans 11:33](#)).

On the other hand, the writings of other men, church councils, synods, etc., can be of great assistance in helping us to understand the Scriptures, but their writings are merely just that, their writings, and not the inspired Word of God. Therefore, as significant as the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is as a systematic theology, neither that, nor any other systematic theology will be appealed to as the ultimate standard for this review. That which will be the ultimate standard of judgment will be the Word of God.

On the other hand, where Mr. Hunt does make reference to the writings of other men, then those writings will be examined, as much as the space for this review will allow, in order to verify Mr. Hunt's accuracy in representing his sources. But, once again, that which will be the final arbiter in matters of doctrine will be the Word of God, not TULIP, or any other codified, theological system associated with a particular denominational group.

The approach for this review, therefore, will be to examine Mr. Hunt's book in three specific areas: the literary form and content; the historical analysis; and the biblical analysis (including linguistic and theological analysis). I will definitely draw some conclusions as a result of my reading and analysis, but you, the reader, will make your own judgment of his book as you too examine the various areas covered in this review through prayer, the Word and your own discernment.

Literary Form & Content

Mr. Hunt's Motive & Passion for Writing the Book

Mr. Hunt is in no way attempting to give an unbiased analysis of Calvinism, but rather his aim and purpose, from the very beginning, is to eviscerate Calvinism in every way he can. His motive and passion for writing this book is clearly described on the very last page in the last three paragraphs of his book:

My heart has been broken by Calvinism's misrepresentation of the God of the Bible whom I love, and for the excuse this has given to atheists not to believe in Him. My sincere and earnest desire in writing this book has been to defend God's character against the libel that denies His love for all and insists that He does not make salvation available to all because he does not want all to be saved. It is my prayer that readers will recognize that Christian authors and leaders, ancient and modern and no matter how well respected, are fallible and that God's Word is our only authority....

It is my prayer that Calvinist readers who may have gotten this far have been fully persuaded to misrepresent no longer the God of love as having predestined multitudes to eternal doom while with-holding from them any opportunity to understand and believe the gospel. How many unbelievers have rejected God because of this deplorable distortion we do not know—but may that excuse be denied everyone from this time forth! And may believers, in confidence that the gospel is indeed glad tidings for all people, take God's good news to the whole world! (Hunt, 414).

His heart's concern is also clearly stated in chapter one of his book where he describes a conversation he had with some people after a speaking engagement, and in particular with a young woman who was a pastor's wife. Mr. Hunt graphically describes the pain and confusion brought to her life through her husband's pursuit of Calvinism. Her husband had been a pastor and had a fruitful ministry until he began to study and promote Calvinism. He ultimately was removed from his pastorate because of his teaching Calvinistic doctrine, and Mr. Hunt says, "The Calvinism which had once seemed so satisfying began to haunt him with uncertainty as to whether he was one of the elect" (Hunt, 17).

Beginning on page 382–411, Mr. Hunt weaves in the fashion of a novel a fictional account of a pastor and his wife, named Al and Jan, who become embroiled in Calvinism. He takes us through their happy days until Al, influenced by his pastor, begins to delve into Calvinism, which in turn leads to great turmoil, confusion and uncertainty even about his salvation. Then Mr. Hunt takes us through a systematic rebuttal of TULIP as Al begins to search the Scriptures and comes to the truth, which is a denial of TULIP and of all that Calvinism stands for. As you read this narrative, all that Mr. Hunt has said in the previous pages in his denunciation of Calvinism is consolidated using Al and Jan as his examples of what he sees as the real life

consequences of Calvinism in people's lives. Thus, what comes across in the beginning and end of Mr. Hunt's book is his heartfelt desire to see people delivered from what he considers to be an unbiblical (Hunt, 369), perhaps even cultic (Hunt, 395) religious system that actually believes in a different God than the God of the Bible (Hunt, 373).

Therefore, in attempting to put myself into Mr. Hunt's "shoes" and see this issue from his perspective, I am certain, after reading his book, that Mr. Hunt believes in his heart that he was totally objective in his presentation. However, I was able to observe throughout his book that he was guilty of many of the things he accused Calvinists of doing. For example, Mr. Hunt accuses Calvinists of "unbiblical twisting of Scripture" (Hunt, 358), and he points out, in his opinion, that Calvin, "contradicted his own theories" (Hunt, 348). Interestingly enough, I found examples in Mr. Hunt's writing of the very same things.

In addition, his narrative of Al and Jan reminded me of the stories I heard when I was a young man in a Baptist Seminary about people who experienced the "baptism of the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues." Indeed, it is absolutely uncanny how identical the format is in Mr. Hunt's account of the horrible and detrimental things that occurred to Al and Jan because of Calvinism as compared to the horrible and detrimental things that I was told occurred to people who received the "baptism of the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues." The only things that have changed are the names of the couple and the reasons for the malevolent events that occurred in their lives (i.e., the reason being Calvinism vs. "speaking in tongues").

On the other hand, were there people who misused and abused the "gifts of the Spirit" in the early days of the Charismatic Movement, and even still today, and was some of their teaching, both then and now concerning the "gifts and working of the Spirit," misdirected and imbalanced? Without question, yes, there was and still is abuse and bad teaching in this area. But does that abuse and misdirected teaching invalidate the biblical reality and validity of the gifts of the Holy Spirit ministering in the lives of believers today?

No, it does not, any more than any misdirected and imbalanced teaching related to Calvinism invalidates the biblical truths of man's corrupt nature; of God's unmerited grace, love and mercy toward fallen mankind, who come into a saving relationship with God based solely on His grace, not their works; of the fact that the blood of Jesus is applied only to those who receive Him as their Lord and Savior; of the fact that God, by His Holy Spirit, brings us to a place of conviction of sin, of conviction of the righteousness of Jesus and His love and forgiveness for us, and of conviction of the judgment that awaits us if we refuse Him, so that we become overwhelmed to the point that we no longer want to resist Him and say no, and we surrender to Him and say, "Yes Lord, I repent and I receive you as my Lord and Savior"; and of the full assurance of salvation and everlasting life to those who are Jesus' "sheep": "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (John 10:27-29).

Thus, that which truly grieves Mr. Hunt is the hurt done to people by what he sees as the imbalanced and misdirected teaching in Calvinism. And once again, the question may be asked, were there people in the early days of the Charismatic Movement, and even today, who have suffered spiritual, mental and emotional anguish because of imbalanced teaching and emphases? Yes, there were and are. But are there many others who have grown in the Lord and been blessed and are a blessing to others through a balanced and biblically centered ministry of the works and ministry of the gifts of the Holy Spirit? Yes, there were and are. And in the same way, have there

been people who have suffered spiritual, mental and emotional anguish because of imbalanced teaching and emphases in Calvinistic doctrine? Yes, there have been and are.

But on the other hand, are there others who have grown in the Lord and been blessed and are a blessing to others through a balanced and biblically centered ministry concerning those teachings typically associated with Calvinistic doctrine? Yes, there have been and are. And what is even more important, the same can be said of EVERY THEOLOGICAL EMPHASIS in the church today, from soteriology, to eschatology, to ecclesiology, etc. In every one of these areas, examples could be given of spiritual, mental and emotional pain that has resulted in the imbalanced and misdirected teaching in various aspects, but that imbalanced teaching does not abrogate the whole of the doctrinal view, but rather points even more clearly to the need for bringing the whole counsel of God's Word, linguistic analysis and historical research, where applicable, into the picture.

For example, when the six-day, Arab-Israeli war occurred in 1967, I was a junior in college, and the one and only eschatology that was being taught on our campus was the pre-millennial, pre-tribulation rapture view. Therefore, after Israel won, the proponents of the pre-millennial, pre-tribulation rapture view were teaching that Jesus would probably be returning within five years. These were primarily leaders who had been trained at Dallas Theological Seminary. The vast majority of the Christian students at that time didn't know enough to challenge that teaching, and this idea of Jesus returning in five years swept through the campus of Mississippi State, causing many students to consider dropping out of school and evangelizing the world in the short time left.

I had one close friend who was supposed to graduate in June of 1968, with a BS in Aeronautical Engineering. However, in December of 1967, he was seriously thinking of dropping out of college because he thought it was a waste of time to graduate when Jesus was coming back in five years! After talking and reasoning with him from Scripture for many days, he finally decided not to drop out of school. Now, did the misdirected teaching of those who were leaders and supported a pre-millennial, pre-tribulation rapture view of eschatology invalidate that whole teaching because of their imbalance? No, it did not. And even though some other of my friends retained spiritual and emotional "scars" for a long time after that fiasco, does their pain and anguish validate a complete repudiation of the pre-millennial, pre-tribulation rapture view of eschatology? No, it does not. What it does do, however, is cause all of us to take note of the fact that we must "let God be found true, though every man be found a liar..." (Romans 3:4).

I could go on and on, but I believe the point is made. That which must be uppermost in any of our studying and research is to take into account the whole counsel of God's Word as much as we are able and to the best of our understanding. Consequently, in viewing the experience of the young pastor's wife whose husband was summarily fired from his church for teaching Calvinism, as well as the fictional account of "Al and Jan," we all grieve over tragic misdirection and imbalanced teaching, but their experience isn't the whole story. Equally valid accounts could also be given of young pastors and their wives who have been blessed and been a blessing to others through a biblically balanced and Christ-centered teaching that is Calvinistic in nature, as well as a fictional account of another "Al and Jan" who, unlike their prototypes, have exposure to a positive, balanced and Christ-centered ministry that is also Calvinistic in nature.

Once again, however, I must reiterate that this review and critique is not focused on attempting either to advocate or repudiate TULIP, nor to try and fit in with a prescribed and acceptable, theological framework for those who would see themselves as pro-Calvinist or anti-

Calvinist. But, as much as I am able, this review is aimed at looking at Scripture in as honest and open a manner as possible in order to see what the Bible is actually saying concerning some of the issues raised by Mr. Hunt in his book, versus attempting to put a “twist” and “garb” on the Scripture from either a pro-Calvinist or anti-Calvinist agenda.

Ad Hominem Attacks

Another very important aspect of the format of Mr. Hunt’s book is that it is replete with *ad hominem* attacks against certain individuals whom he feels are key proponents of Calvinism, and his book is laden with biting sarcasm when dealing with many of their writings and beliefs. In all fairness to Mr. Hunt, his level of criticism is measured at times, being far more gentle and respectful with some, and quite harsh and vitriolic with others. With regard to the latter, I also found it interesting that as he points out the harsh and vitriolic tones used by Luther against Erasmus, and used by Calvin against those with whom he disagreed, he apparently doesn’t see himself being guilty of the same in his similar attacks against some of those with whom he disagrees. One example that stood out to me was his remark about Dr. D. James Kennedy. On pages 352–353, Mr. Hunt is pointing out what he feels is a contradiction of Calvinists, and in particular of Dr. Kennedy:

Yet Calvinists often contradict themselves because they slip into an evangelism mode. At times D. James Kennedy, founder of Evangelism Explosion, makes it sound not only as though salvation is available to all but even that faith precedes regeneration:.... Kennedy trains others to evangelize and in the process contradicts Calvinism: “For if it is true that we *must* be born again, then it is also true that we *may* be born again.... That, my friends, is the good news.” Does he seriously mean that salvation for the elect alone is good news for everyone?...

As for Kennedy’s “good” news, are those who have been predestined to eternal torment expected to rejoice that their doom is sealed and there is nothing that can be done to change it? Can he and other evangelistically inclined Calvinists seriously think their practice matches their belief? (Hunt, 352–353)

Now for those who fully embrace Mr. Hunt’s position, they may not see anything wrong with his reference to Dr. Kennedy because they may feel Mr. Hunt is doing what is necessary in order to expose and root out what they consider to be “heresy” in the church. Thus, they may view Mr. Hunt’s sarcasm as totally justified. On the other hand, although I do believe the gospel is for all men and that faith precedes regeneration, I do not consider Mr. Hunt’s sarcastic slam against Dr. Kennedy as either appropriate or fitting for a man of Mr. Hunt’s stature in the evangelical community today. Dr. Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion is responsible for leading hundreds of thousands, and perhaps even millions of people to a saving faith in Christ over the past almost forty years. All one needs to do is go to Evangelism Explosion’s web site at www.eeinternational.org, and you will see their evangelistic heart for the lost around the world, and then you can go to Reclaiming America for Christ’s web site at www.reclaimamerica.org and see their commitment to placing themselves on the frontline in the battle to reclaim the very soul of our nation for Christ.

You know, with all the incredible evil that is emerging in our nation and the world, this is not the time to be shooting at other evangelicals who are orthodox, Christ-centered and Bible believing brothers and sisters in Christ who are aggressively and effectively sharing the Gospel

with a lost and dying world. Thus, even though I might be in agreement more with Mr. Hunt on certain theological issues than I would with Dr. Kennedy, I am completely in opposition to Mr. Hunt's slamming of such men as Dr. Kennedy, while at the same time I completely support Dr. Kennedy's desire to share the Gospel with the whole world.

One more thing about EE, and that is it comprises evangelicals from across all denominational affiliations: Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Assembly of God, Nazarenes, etc. In addition, the trainers who conduct EE clinics all around the world are from all these various denominations as well. Thus, regardless of whether one may disagree with certain points of Dr. Kennedy's theology, it appears to me that he is a great example of a Christian leader in our world today who is carrying out [II Timothy 4:5](#): "But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."

Formatting in Book

The following area of review deals with spelling, footnotes, references and sources. These are areas in which all of us writers can and do make mistakes, and they can easily be corrected with good proofreading and astute editing. However, that being said, it is still important for you the reader to be aware of these errors so that you can adequately and accurately evaluate the material he presents.

There is only one spelling error I wanted to refer to and that was Mr. Hunt's transliteration into English of the Greek word for *foreknow* on page 227. It is a very slight error, but one that could be misleading for someone who is unfamiliar with the Koine Greek of the New Testament. The word in Greek is προγινώσκω, and the correct form of transliteration is *PROGINOSKO*. Mr. Hunt wrote it as *PROGONISKO*. Again, this is not a major error, but one the reader should be aware of if he or she was trying to locate the correct word in a Greek lexicon, or in some other source that would have transliterated material.

With regard to footnotes, on page 77 Mr. Hunt is giving a quote from Arminius concerning predestination. However, as you check out the reference, you find that the correct reference to footnote No. 22 is Op. cit. 2:698, not 693. In addition, on the following page, I scoured the references that footnote Nos. 26–29 pointed to on page 91 from *The Works of James Arminius*. However, I could not find anything in the references cited in Arminius that remotely resembled the quotes given on page 78 where footnotes Nos. 26–29 were listed. Now that could be because of my own lack of perception, or it could be that it was incorrectly entered and cited by Mr. Hunt.

On page 369, footnote No. 65 is given in the text as though it was from Spurgeon, but on page 376, he cites it as being from Palmer. He then gives footnote No. 66 twice in the text, but the second usage of it is actually No. 67, which he correctly gives as coming from Spurgeon on page 376. On page 371, in the text, footnote No. 68 is attributed to Palmer, but on page 376 it is cited as coming from Spurgeon. Earlier in that same chapter on page 356, he partially cites footnote No. 25 correctly as Op. cit. IV:xvi, 18 (referring to Calvin's Institutes), when in actuality it is 18–19, and footnote No. 26 is actually IV:xv, 22, not IV:xvi, 18–21 (referring once again to Calvin's Institutes). On page 395, he cites footnote No. 47 as being Calvin op. cit., 71–73, which is apparently the page numbers, but what should have been given is, Calvin op. cit. I:vii, 4–5, which is what he consistently did throughout his book and is the correct form.

These are only a few of the footnotes I checked where errors were found. And even though I did check a large number of his footnotes, I was not able to check as many as I would have liked

because I didn't have access to all of his bibliographic sources. However, I would cautiously presume that if I found the number of errors I did in the limited sources I checked, there is a good chance that perhaps others also exist.

The other area I would now like to look at is the use of his sources and his utilization of ellipses. Mr. Hunt has a consistent pattern of eliminating important portions of material in his quotations that, if included in his quote in its proper context, would tend to undermine the position he is trying to establish by the use of the material he is actually quoting.

Now here too, all of us as writers can be guilty of this, and I know that at times, I have been guilty of the same thing. However, it behooves us to be as careful and thorough as possible in order to present accurately what our sources are actually saying. I am not saying that in all of his quotations and use of ellipses this is the case, but it is true in many of the ones I checked, and some of those are very crucial with regard to what he is attempting to affirm. Therefore, you, the reader, must make the effort to check out the material he quotes and refers to.

In fact, Mr. Hunt says to do as much on the very last page of his book: "It is my prayer that readers will recognize that Christian authors and leaders, ancient or modern and no matter how well respected, are all fallible and that God's Word is our only authority" (Hunt, 414). I greatly admire Mr. Hunt's honesty and integrity in making such a statement, and that most certainly applies to checking out the full quotes from the sources he cites.

The first example I want to give you is found on page 36 and footnote No. 14 where Mr. Hunt presents a quote from Calvin's Institutes that he implies is from Calvin himself:

Much of his teaching is warmed-over Roman Catholicism. Let those evangelicals who praise Calvin as thoroughly biblical justify, for example, the following from his Institutes:

I believe in the Holy Catholic Church ... whence flow perpetual remission of sins, and full restoration to eternal life.

Indeed, as one reads Mr. Hunt's statement above about the quote he is going to give, the ordinary reader (and by "ordinary" I mean that reader who is not familiar with Calvin's writings, let alone anything else from the early church) would conclude that the quote Mr. Hunt is giving is from the original pen of Calvin himself. However, in this instance, the contrary is true. The fact is that what he is quoting is from the *Epitome of the Institutions*, by Gaspar Olevian, and this is contained in "Method and Arrangement" in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹ What is equally important, is that not only is the quote given above by Mr. Hunt not from the pen of Calvin, the first phrase is from the Apostles' Creed:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting. AMEN.²

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. I, "Method and Arrangement" (Albany, OR: Sage Software, 1996), sect. IV, 43-44.

² *Creeds of the Church* (Albany, OR: Sage Software, 1997), 9.

In large part this creed was a statement against Gnosticism, and it was a confession by professing believers as they were approaching the waters of baptism as a testimony of their commitment to the truth handed down by the Apostles. The earliest known version of this dates back to Hippolytus ca. 215 AD, and he used it for new believers who wanted to be baptized.³ This is not a confession of belief in the Roman Catholic Church of the middle ages, replete with all kinds of corruption, but rather a confession of the “universal church,” of which all true believers are a part. Thus, in Latin, *catholic* means universal. Gaspar Olevian, therefore, is giving a summation of what is in the Institutes.

In addition, here, as elsewhere throughout Mr. Hunt’s book, it is not so much what he includes in his quotes, but what he excludes that is of vital importance as well. I want to give you the entire quote from Mr. Olevian, not Calvin, and I believe it will be seen that what Mr. Olevian actually says is somewhat different from what Mr. Hunt portrays:

Since the Holy Spirit does not ingraft all men into Christ, or endue them with faith, and those whom he does so endue he does not ordinarily endue without means, but uses for that purpose the preaching of the Gospel and the dispensation of the Sacraments, together with the administration of all kinds of discipline, the Creed contains the following article, *“I believe in the Holy Catholic Church,” namely, that Church which, when lying in eternal death, the Father, by gratuitous election, freely reconciled to himself in Christ, and endued with the Holy Spirit, that, being engrafted into Christ, it might have communion with him as its proper head; whence flow perpetual remission of sins, and full restoration to eternal life.* Accordingly the Church is treated of in the first fourteen chapters of the Fourth Book, which thereafter treats of the means which the Holy Spirit employs in calling us effectually from spiritual death, and preserving the Church, in other words, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These means are, as it were, the royal scepter of Christ, by which, through the efficacy of his Spirit, he commences his spiritual reign in the Church, advances it from day to day, and after this life, without the use of means, finally perfects it. This subject is continued to the 20th chapter.⁴

In reading the full quote from which Mr. Hunt took a part (I italicized the portion that he took part of the quote from), I believe it is clear that Mr. Olevian is saying that it is from “Christ,” not the Roman Catholic Church mechanism, Who is “its proper head; whence flow perpetual remission of sins, and full restoration to eternal life.” Thus, as best as I can read from the above full quote of Olevian, Jesus is the “proper head” of the Church, and it is from Christ “its proper head; whence flow perpetual remission of sins, and full restoration to eternal life” to those who are part of the “Church,” that is, the body of true believers grafted into Christ by the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Now Mr. Hunt goes on to quote in footnote No. 15 an accurate presentation of what Calvin actually says. However, as you go on to read in IV:1, 5, you can see more clearly what Calvin means by saying that “beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for”⁵:

Paul says that our Savior “ascended far above all heavens, that he might fill all things. And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some,

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Calvin, Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., IV:I, 4, p. 1159.

pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith; and of the knowledge of the Son of God, into a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:10–13)... Let us hold, agreeably to the passage we quoted from Paul, that the Church can only be edified by external preaching, and that there is no other bond by which the saints can be kept together than by uniting with one consent to observe the order which God has appointed in his Church for learning and making progress.⁶

What is being presented, therefore, by Calvin, is that by the term “Church,” he is referring to the body of believers who are in Christ through the indwelling power of His Holy Spirit in their lives. Would I ever use the term “Mother” to describe the church, or would I ever say that “beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation can be hoped for...”? No, I would not. What I would say is that beyond a personal relationship with Jesus, “no forgiveness of sins, no salvation can be hoped for.” But in essence, as I read the whole of chapter 1 in Book IV, that is what I see Calvin saying, and furthermore, I do not see Calvin saying in any way, that salvation is any other form but the person of Jesus.

I do not see him attempting to resurrect Roman Catholicism, but rather point to the importance of believers functioning together as the body of Christ as described by Paul in the above passage in Ephesians, as well as the exhortation for us as believers in [Hebrews 10:23–25](#):

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; 24 and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, 25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.

Once again, would I word things as Calvin does, or would I place the emphasis on certain things as he does? No, I would not. But Calvin was living in a different time with far different cultural, religious and social concepts than we as evangelicals have today. For one thing, there was no such thing as democracy, and the social legislation and laws of that day reflected that. The social environment and tradition of that day in turn impacted the life and construct of the incipient, evangelical church, in the same way our American lifestyle and traditions have impacted and affect how we interpret and apply biblical truth to our cultural setting.

For example, many evangelicals in our country were slave owners at the beginning of our nation, as well as up to and through the Civil War. Culturally they saw absolutely nothing wrong with owning slaves from a biblical perspective because it was condoned and accepted as a part of the normal lifestyle in both the Old and New Testaments. In addition, many people have a very false view of the reason for the Civil War from the South’s perspective. Less than 6 percent of whites and freed blacks owned one or more slaves at the beginning of the Civil War. Thus, what the vast majority of Southerners were fighting for was States Rights, not the continuation of slavery.

However, we look back on that time now and it is very hard to imagine how we, as a nation founded on the principles enunciated in the Declaration of Independence, that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness,”

⁶ Ibid., IV:I, 5, pp. 1160–1163.

could have ever tolerated slavery. But we must remember that we are asking this question over two hundred years after the fact. How could we have done it?

Evangelicals who supported slavery did so because it was a culturally approved part of society at that time, and, as previously stated, it had a biblical basis for its support. The same, therefore, can be said of Calvin with his approach to the Church and many other issues. However, as with slavery, so too with a number of theological issues facing the Reformers, including the idea of the Church, we have biblically and culturally grown beyond some of their early ideas and beliefs. For one thing, we live under a democracy in the West, which was an unheard of thing at that time.

In addition, the Catholic Church had a place of prominence and power that it no longer has today. And thirdly, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and other evangelicals were in the process of establishing a new order of Christianity that has come to be called Evangelicalism. Today, we enjoy the established fruits of Evangelicalism, but then, they were fighting, literally, to stay alive.

Therefore, once again, I do not see in any way a desire on Calvin's part in chapter 1 of Book IV to resurrect a corrupt Roman Catholicism into the true Church of called out believers, whose faith is in Jesus for their salvation, not the church machine of Roman Catholicism. Calvin attempts to address this in particular in sections 2 & 3, chapter 1, Book 4, and especially chapter 6, Book 4.

There are two other references that I would like to refer to specifically before going on to another section of this review. The first is chapter 3 in Mr. Hunt's book concerning Calvin's conversion. On page 38, Mr. Hunt says in parentheses that Calvin was converted in the early part of 1533. He then goes on to say:

Moreover, the exact nature of Calvin's conversion, at least up to that point in time, is placed in further question by two known facts. As late as June of 1533 he helped a young woman to gain entrance to a nunnery,²¹ a rather odd thing for a convinced convert to Protestantism to do. Even more peculiar, instead of sending an immediate message withdrawing himself, Calvin kept himself on the payroll of the Roman Catholic Church until a year after he claimed to have been miraculously delivered from the "deep slough" of "obstinate addiction to the superstitions of the papacy" (Hunt, 38–39).

In the above quote, Mr. Hunt takes footnote No. 21 from *The History & Character of Calvinism*, by John T. McNeill. Mr. Hunt is using McNeill as a source to substantiate that "as late as June of 1533, he helped a young woman to gain entrance to a nunnery...." and thereby bring into question the genuineness and depth of Calvin's commitment to Christ in early 1533, which is when Mr. Hunt asserts Calvin was converted. However, McNeill has an entire chapter dedicated to the discussion of Calvin's conversion, and it is from this chapter Mr. Hunt took his reference in footnote No. 21 in the above quote.

On the other hand, it appears that Mr. Hunt either completely disregarded everything else McNeill had to say about Calvin's conversion, or he only read the one, brief sentence at the beginning of the paragraph where mention of the nunnery is made. I would encourage you, the reader, to read McNeill's entire chapter on this subject, and you will see a completely different assessment from what Mr. Hunt gives (Chapter VII — Calvin's Conversion). The following are a

²¹ This is a present active participle from ἀφορώω, and its emphasis is that of a continuous, ongoing action.

series of sequential quotes from this chapter dealing with the very subject of the date of Calvin's conversion:

A letter written by Calvin, after his conversion, to Bucer was formerly dated by editors September, 1532. It is now recognized to be of a later year, probably 1534... On 1 November of that year [1533] Cop delivered a rectorial address that startled the old believers into vigorous reaction. The long accepted view, first published by Beza in 1575, that Calvin was Cop's ghost writer for this discourse has been abandoned by most authorities....

There is preserved in Geneva a copy in Calvin's hand of a part of this daring manifesto, but it is almost certainly not the original draft, nor is the complete copy that rests in Strasbourg the original. Calvin's having transcribed Cop's text need occasion no surprise, in view of the close friendship between them, and from the fact that Calvin shared the unhappy consequences ... The assumption of Calvin's authorship breaks down.

We may assume, however, that it substantially represents Calvin's views in the autumn of 1533. If so, had he, as many believe, already experienced the "conversion"? Since, as we have seen, he refers prominently to his obstinate attachment to the Papacy prior to that event, we naturally look for a repudiation of the Papacy as a mark of its effect. The Papacy is, however, not in question either in this document or in any of Calvin's extant letters of 1533... Cop had temporarily won a victory for Marguerite in the university: he was her champion here with reference to the broad religious policy of France. He avails himself of some Luther material, but the outlook is not that of Luther, or of the latter Calvin. If Calvin approved the utterance he was, we may say, ripe for conversion rather than fresh from it. The date of the *subita conversio* [sudden conversion] must be put later.

All we know of Calvin in 1533 bears testimony that he had not changed his religious allegiance. In June, with Nicholas Cop, he visited a nunnery and interviewed the abbess in order to arrange for the admission to it of a sister of his friend Francois Daniel. On 23 August he was in Noyon attending (though not a member) a session of the chapter, in which it was decided to hold a solemn procession to allay the plague. In October he presented to Daniel a book by Gerard Roussel, Lefevre's eloquent disciple, who had been imprisoned for a short time after Cop's address and who was also of the number of Calvin's friends and correspondents. Neither Roussel nor Daniel ever moved from the position of Lefevre to Protestantism.⁷

The point to be made here is that Mr. Hunt selectively takes what he wants to use from a source that will validate his position, but he will reject from that same source equally valid material that is contextually and intrinsically linked to the material he used, but the latter doesn't coincide with what he wants to substantiate. McNeill states quite clearly, therefore, that Calvin's conversion did not occur in 1533. Thus, on the one hand, Mr. Hunt uses McNeill to substantiate Calvin's help of the young lady to get into the nunnery in June, 1533, and he views that as one among other issues that bring into question both the validity of Calvin's conversion, as well as the depth of that conversion if he was truly saved. But on the other hand, he does not want to use

⁷ John T. McNeil, *The History & Character of Calvinism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 109–112.

McNeill's statement that Calvin was not converted in 1533 because that would tend to invalidate Mr. Hunt's portrayal of Calvin as an immature, compromising and mercenary type of a person after his conversion, if he was indeed converted at all.

McNeill's presentation of all of the above is intrinsically linked together, but Mr. Hunt surgically excises those portions he doesn't like and creates his own picture. This is not an uncommon error to make for those of us who do research, and it is one that I have also committed. However, that is all the more reason for you, the reader, to read this reference, as well as the others of Mr. Hunt, in order for you to come to your own conclusion.

This next example is the last that I want to give of missteps concerning sources and references, and, without question, it is one of the most unfortunate. It is found on page 368 where Mr. Hunt is quoting from a portion of the *Canons of Dort*. This is not an instance of exclusion of important material through the use of ellipses, nor is this an example of his taking a quote from a source to support a specific emphasis, and leaving other, contextually related material out because it would actually undermine his emphasis. This is an example of something that can easily happen to any of us when we are so driven by an agenda to find support for our position that we do not carefully examine a source that may initially appear to support our emphasis, but in reality it does not. Again, this is something that any of us can fall prey to, and, once again, I know I have, but it is also something that we need to encourage one another to avoid as much as possible.

Mr. Hunt is dealing with the whole idea presented by Reformed theology that because of man's "total depravity," the Holy Spirit must first regenerate him before he can exercise faith to believe. He repeatedly challenges this doctrine throughout his book, referring to a multitude of Scriptures to support his contention. And in my opinion, I believe his arguments against this particular doctrine are some of his strongest, but not in this particular instance. Now although I agree with his position on this issue, his agenda that drives him to thoroughly eviscerate Calvinism in every area has produced on this occasion a rather serious error. I will present the quote as he gives it:

But as man by the fall did not cease to be a creature, endowed with understanding and will, nor did sin which pervaded the whole race of mankind, deprive him of the human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death; so also the grace of regeneration does not treat man as senseless stocks and blocks, nor takes away their will and its properties, neither does violence thereto; but spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully *ends* it; that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign; in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist (Hunt, 368).

I italicized the word in question, "ends." If this is not a typo, and based on Mr. Hunt's discussion about this word and its implications in the paragraph following this quote, it doesn't appear that it is, then this is an unfortunate instance of incorrect data being presented as factual. It may be that the source he was using (Lawrence M. Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism* [Vance Publications, Pensacola, FL, rev. ed. 1999] 619) incorrectly printed the above quote, and, therefore, Mr. Hunt was simply using what he had. However, the truth of the matter is that the word in question is not "ends," but rather, "bends." Mr. Hunt, in the paragraph that follows this quote, says:

The will is a knotty problem for Calvinists, which they massage around but don't solve. Dort offers a strange solution: "the grace of regeneration ... spiritually quickens,

heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully *ends* [the will] ...” What an odd “healing” that puts an *end* to what it “heals”! Why wasn’t this “ready and sincere spiritual obedience” implanted in Adam and Eve? And now that the elect have this new will through regeneration, why don’t they always obey God perfectly?...

Even the regenerated have a fleshly will that, despite Dort, apparently wasn’t *ended* at the new birth: “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other...” ([Galatians 5:17](#)) (Hunt, 368).

Thus, regardless of whether one agrees with Dort, what is true is that the Synod never said “ends,” but rather, “bends.” The actual translation from the Latin that contains this line is: “... *ita etiam haec divina regenerationis gratia, non agit in hominibus tanquam truncis et stipitibus, nec vol-untatem ejusque proprietates tollit, aut invitam violenter cogit, sed spiritualiter vivificat, sanat, corrigit, suaviter simul ac potenter flectit:...*”⁸ The translation in English is: “... so also this divine grace of regeneration, it does not perform in men as if [they are] lopped tree trunks and blockheads, neither does it take away [their] will and its properties, nor does it violently compel against one’s will, but it spiritually gives life, heals, corrects, sweetly and at the same time efficaciously it bends...”

Once again, I have made plenty of mistakes in writing, quoting, using ellipses, etc., and so I completely understand how these things can happen. I am assuming, therefore, that the source of the error in this instance must be Vance’s book. If that is the case, how many other errors might be in Vance’s book? Mr. Hunt uses Vance quite extensively as a source, and so, once again, the importance of checking out his sources and the accuracy of his quotes cannot be overstated.

There are two things that are significant about the above statement in Dort. The first is that Dort says quite clearly that the “divine grace of regeneration” does not “violently compel against one’s will.” This seems to be in contrast with what some try and portray Calvinists as saying. And secondly, the word *flectit* in Latin means “bends,” not “ends.” It comes from *flectere*, which in this context means “to alter the direction of, to turn, wheel.”⁹ Thus, according to Dort, the Holy Spirit causes our wills to be altered and turned toward Jesus wherein we must make the final step of saying, “Yes, Jesus, I believe,” or, “Yes, Jesus, I will obey you in faith.”

Now whereas I do not agree with the Reformed view that regeneration occurs before faith (I believe it occurs simultaneously with the exercise of our faith), I certainly do agree with the above description of how the Holy Spirit brings us to a saving faith in Christ, and I especially agree with the use of the Latin word *flectere* to describe that work of the Holy Spirit in “bending” our will toward accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior, versus “ending” our will so that we have no choice (incidentally, from *flectere* we get the English word “flex,” which includes the idea of bending the arm to cause one’s muscles to expand).

Thus, Mr. Hunt’s representation of Dort saying that our wills are “ended” by God’s grace is incorrect. Furthermore, the “bending” of our wills toward Christ doesn’t stop with our conversion, but it is carried on after we are saved as the Holy Spirit continues His work within us of conforming us “to the image” of Christ. The work of regeneration, therefore, begins a lifelong process of the Holy Spirit “bending” our wills to be in conformity with God’s will, and that is what Dort is describing in the heart of a believer in the clause quoted by Mr. Hunt:

⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 568.

⁹ M.A. Simpson, *Cassell’s New Latin Dictionary* (New York: Funk & Wagnall’s, 1968), 250.

so also this grace of regeneration does not treat man as senseless stocks and blocks, nor take away their will and its properties, neither does violence thereto; but spiritually quickens, heals, corrects, and at the same time sweetly and powerfully bends it; that where carnal rebellion and resistance formerly prevailed, a ready and sincere spiritual obedience begins to reign; in which the true and spiritual restoration and freedom of our will consist.¹⁰

There are a number of other instances of similar type errors, but I do not want to spend any more time in this arena of the review. You, the reader, can see in the examples I have given the nature of his errors and mistakes, and I hope this alerts you to the need of carefully examining all that Mr. Hunt says and gives as his sources and references. Again, some of the mistakes are minor and can be easily corrected with a thorough editing process. However, others are somewhat more serious in nature (e.g., the Canons of Dort reference), and these are the ones that you, the reader, need to be alerted to and scrutinize, as well as paying close attention to his use of ellipses.

Historical Analysis

In the area of history, I would encourage you, the reader, to find and read the material Mr. Hunt references so that you will know for yourself what is actually being said. With regard to Augustine, I have never read any evangelical author who writes with such animosity and vitriol against Augustine as does Mr. Hunt. I have read a great deal of Augustine's writings, and whereas there are a number of things that I do not agree with concerning certain beliefs and concepts he advocates, on the other hand I certainly do believe that I will spend eternity with him in heaven, and I, and evangelical Christianity at large, have also been greatly blessed by a host of things he wrote and did.

For example, I do not agree with his view concerning baptism for infants, nor do I agree with the prevailing view of water baptism by the early church as a whole (i.e., that in the waters of baptism, one's sins were actually washed away). And neither do I agree with the later application of Augustine's position on the Church's use of force and persecution in order to bring heretics and schismatics back into the fold as was practiced by Rome through the use of the Inquisition.

However, I am speaking from my 21st century perch, looking back 1800 years to a very different time, in which a very different cultural and theological milieu of Christianity was in vogue. Thus, for me or anyone else to sit in a self-righteous position of judging the actions of these early Christian leaders and congregations, without fully immersing myself as much as possible into their time and understanding of what it meant to follow Christ from their perspective, is foolhardy at best, and sheer, unadulterated arrogance at worst.

Therefore, without spending a great deal of time on this section concerning Augustine, I would like to say, concerning the Donatists, for example, that one would need to read as much as he or she can on the history of the early church from its inception, up to and through the middle of the fifth century, just after Augustine's death, in order to get a comprehensive grasp of the Donatist controversy. In doing so, you will get a much better picture of the issues involved in Augustine's support of force to squelch the Donatist schism and why. In addition, you will also discover some interesting aspects of the Donatists themselves.

¹⁰ Ibid., 591–592.

I was in a meeting once where Mr. Hunt made the comment that perhaps he would have been a supporter of the Donatists himself. I do not know if Mr. Hunt is aware of the fact that the Donatists had their own terrorist group called the *Circumcelliones*, which in Latin originally was applied to monks who had no specific abode, but would wander from one monastic cell to another. The Donatist terrorists adopted this name for themselves, their aim being to force believers into accepting their “rigorist” view of exclusivism from those they considered *tradutios*. In Latin, *tradutios* means “to hand over,” and it was used in a deriding sense to describe those priests who “handed over” Scripture to government authorities during the Diocletian persecution of 303–305.

In turn, it came to be the idiom applied to those the Donatists considered to be “traitors” to the true church, which the Donatists believed they constituted. The *Circumcelliones* resorted to violence and coercion against those whom they felt were not carrying out equity and fairness to all as they believed they should (their victims including laity as well as clergy). The upshot of this was that the church in turn resorted to coercion and persecution to bring these schismatics back into unity, and Augustine was a proponent of this policy.

There were many other aspects of the Donatist controversy that included issues beyond doctrine, such as political, social, economic and geographical concerns.¹¹ The Donatists may even be compared in ways to the contemporary IRA in Northern Ireland in relation to the terrorism employed by both to achieve their stated goals. The point being, before one castigates Augustine for his approval of force and persecution to reinstate schismatics, one should find out as much of the facts as possible.

With reference to Calvin and his rule in Geneva, once again, one needs to carefully study the religious and cultural mindset of that time and period. From my 21st century position, would I want to live in a Geneva today under the same type of rule and authority as established by Calvin back then? Even though I am a very conservative person in every way, I can honestly say that today, not only would I choose not to live there, I would actively oppose some of the policies Calvin instituted.

However, on the other hand, I am speaking comfortably from my protected, American lifestyle, which has a foundation rooted in the Bill of Rights, and a system of laws, that, until the last thirty years, was primarily rooted in our Judeo-Christian ethic. I believe that Calvin did the best he knew to do, grounded in what he understood to be a biblically based system of social justice and law, including his treatment of Servetus. I previously discussed the issue of American slavery alongside the Declaration of Independence in comparison to Calvin’s view of the Church. Once again, at the time of our country’s origin, a great host of Christians in this country saw no conflict between the continuation of slavery and the Declaration of Independence because of the cultural and biblical context slavery was couched in.

However, today we wouldn’t even consider such an institution to remain in existence because of our cultural and biblical understanding concerning the freedom and dignity of all men. There are some today who want to disembowel the constitutional framework of our country because of

¹¹ I derived this material from my own knowledge of the heresy, as well as the following sources: Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 274–277; Allan D. Fitzgerald, gen. ed., *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 281–286; Adrian Hastings, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177–178.

the fact that some of the original framers of our Constitution were slave owners, and, because of that, these same people see our entire Constitution as invalid. Such reasoning is Iudicrous at best, but this makes as much sense as those who would want to disavow everything Calvin wrote and did because of the system of social justice and law that was enacted in Geneva.

The exact same thing could be said of Luther and his support of the nobles during the peasant uprising. If we are going to present the history of our forefathers correctly and draw proper conclusions from their history, then we must look at their contemporary setting through the eyes of their understanding of applied, biblical truth in order to get an accurate picture of why they believed, taught and did what they did.

Therefore, I would pray that God will give all of us just such a reasoned understanding of our forefathers and their times, culture and application of biblical truth as they understood it. I would be careful to warn all of us to not be so quick to judge, lest, “in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you” ([Matthew 7:2](#)). Over the years I have seen churches that have judged other churches and denominations for their lack of spirituality in certain areas. Typically, these churches have thought of themselves as far above the “carnal trappings of religion” that they so disdained in other groups, but over time, they became and embraced the very things they once criticized and eschewed in others. Remember, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” ([Proverbs 16:18](#)).

Biblical Analysis

There are six areas of specific, theological emphases that I chose to deal with, but these in no way exhaust the manifold areas of concern touched on in Mr. Hunt’s book. These are simply the ones I felt most impressed to analyze and provide a scriptural exegesis for in light of what appeared to me as an inaccurate analysis and exegesis by Mr. Hunt.

The Nature of Man & Regeneration—[Genesis 6:5](#), [Psalm 14:1–3](#), [Matthew 19:16–17](#), [Mark 10:17–18](#); [Luke 18:18–19](#); [John 3:19–2](#); [Isaiah 64:6](#)

Our analysis of Mr. Hunt’s biblical interpretation will begin by taking a look at chapter 8 in his book. In this chapter, Mr. Hunt wants to set what he sees as biblical truth over against Calvinistic teaching with respect to the ability of unregenerate man, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, to “make a genuine choice to repent and turn to God” (Hunt, 117) without first of all being regenerated and enabled by the Holy Spirit, unbeknownst to him, to exercise saving faith. The premise of his argument is clearly presented in the following statement: “Why create this elaborate fiction of mourning and weeping over multitudes who God knows will not only refuse to repent but who, unless He regenerates them, cannot repent because of their total inability to do so?” (Hunt, 109). He goes on to say: “As inspired by the Holy Spirit, however, the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation gives the clear impression that those with whom God pleads could of their own volition repent and turn to Him if they would” (Hunt, 109–110).

Mr. Hunt also gives several quotes from different evangelical authors who are in line with his view, including Frederic Farrar: “Frederic Farrar has rightly said, what God commands ‘must be in the power of the will, since ability is the measurement of obligation’” (Hunt, 110). Later on in this same chapter under the section entitled, “When Is Depravity Not Total?,” Mr. Hunt purposes to demonstrate that “the most ungodly people are capable of some morally good thoughts and deeds” (Hunt, 116). He goes on to give examples of such deeds by pointing out the heroism on the battlefield of unsaved soldiers; he makes reference to Albert Schweitzer’s altruism in the face of his denial of Christianity (a reference from Palmer); he considers Nazi prison guards who

would show kindness and tenderness toward their wives and children, while during the day they were murdering Jewish prisoners; and he acknowledges there are unsaved businessmen who can be trusted. Mr. Hunt then states: “The Bible clearly teaches that the natural, unregenerated man can do good, and it offers many examples.... We must take Scripture as a whole” (Hunt, 117).

As I shared earlier, I completely concur with Mr. Hunt’s position that regeneration by the Spirit occurs simultaneously with faith and repentance, not prior to faith and unbeknownst to the sinner, according to some Calvinistic doctrine. I also completely agree with Mr. Hunt’s statement, “We must take Scripture as a whole.” However, I do have a serious problem with his statement, “The Bible clearly teaches that the natural, unregenerated man can do good, and it offers many examples.” In my opinion, as I read through the whole of Mr. Hunt’s book, I see this chapter, this section, and this statement, as being the fulcrum upon which everything else hinges in his view of man in relation to God and His holiness. Therefore, this view expressed by Mr. Hunt will be our starting point as we proceed with an analysis of his biblical interpretation.

The biblical passage that Mr. Hunt alludes to in the section “When Is Depravity Not Total?,” is [Genesis 6:5](#): “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Of this passage, Mr. Hunt says:

... the declaration that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” describes the general attitude of the heart, not what it must produce at every minute of every day.... In the same fashion we must understand the statements about man’s wickedness and sin as describing his general attitude but not his necessity” (Hunt, 117–118).

With all due respect to Mr. Hunt and his very sincere and heartfelt desire to correct a wrong that he believes is seriously damaging the body of Christ, I see his handling of this passage as being no less an attempt to alter the plain and simple meaning of Scripture and have it say something it is not saying in the same way he accuses Calvinists of “unbiblical twisting of Scripture” (Hunt, 358). I would like, therefore, to give as clear, simple and thorough an analysis of this verse in its context as space permits.

First of all, this passage is set against the impending flood that God said He was going to send in order to “blot out man whom I have created from the face of the land, from man to animals to creeping things and to birds of the sky...” ([Genesis 6:7](#)). However, “Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.... Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his time; Noah walked with God” ([Genesis 6:8–9](#)). Most importantly, how was Noah’s righteousness determined? If it was by his works, then the death of Christ was completely superfluous. However, we read in [Hebrews 11:7](#) wherein his righteousness was derived: “By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.”

In addition, the word for “blameless” in Hebrew is the adjective *TAMIM* (טָמִים) which means to be “complete, sound, whole, unimpaired and innocent.” That brings up the next question, what does it mean, therefore, that Noah was “blameless (i.e., complete and innocent) in his time”? Does that mean that he was without sin? Once again, if that was true, then Jesus’ death was superfluous because if Noah did it, then so can we, and furthermore, we should! However, in [Genesis 6:12](#), we read: “And God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh (including Noah and his family) had corrupted their way upon the earth.” How do we know that

Noah too was included in this “all”? We know he was because [Romans 3:23](#) says, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” and that “all” certainly includes Noah and his family as well. Thus, just as his righteousness was based on faith, so too his being “blameless” was ascribed to him because of the fact that he was “whole and innocent” through the righteousness of God imputed to him as a result of his faith in God.

With the basis for Noah’s relationship with God being established, let us turn to [Genesis 6:5](#). Mr. Hunt takes great pains in chapter 16 on “Limited Atonement” to stress the fact that the word “all” in such passages as [II Peter 3:9](#) means just that, versus the “elect only” that many Calvinists insist the word “all” means with regards to salvation: “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

Here too, I agree with Mr. Hunt in his view of how the word “all” should be understood with regard to those passages concerning the offer of salvation in Christ. However, when Mr. Hunt turns to [Genesis 6:5](#), he makes an “about face,” and there he says that “every” does not mean “every” as we would assume it means, but, like those Calvinists who say that “all” in [II Peter 3:9](#) for example is actually referring to the “elect only” and not to the whole of mankind, so too does Mr. Hunt say that the “every” in [Genesis 6:5](#) is “the general attitude of the heart, not what it must produce at every moment of every day” (Hunt, 117–118). This, in my opinion, is a very incorrect view, and it is based on an incorrect understanding of the depth and permeation of sin throughout man’s nature. Consequently, as I stated previously, this perspective affects many other areas of Mr. Hunt’s beliefs and teaching.

The following is an amplified translation of [Genesis 6:5](#) from the Hebrew:

And the Lord saw that the evil, misery, injury, distress and wrong of man was exceedingly and abundantly great on the earth, and the whole of each and every frame of the thoughts, plans, purposes, devices and inventions of his mind, will, soul and affections were only and altogether evil, wicked and bad the whole of each and every day.

The LXX, Vulgate, Peshitta and Targums¹² all say the same thing in equally as intense a fashion as does the Hebrew. Twice in [Genesis 6:5](#) we see the Hebrew word *kol* (כָּל) used, and in

¹² The LXX reads as follows: ἰδὼν δὲ Κύριος ὁ Θεὸς, ὅτι ἐπληθυνθησαν αἱ κακίαι τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, καὶ πᾶς τις διανοεῖται ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ αὐτοῦ ἐπιμελῶς ἐπὶ τὰ πονηρὰ πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας (“And when the Lord God saw that the depravities of man were multiplied upon the earth, and that everyone is continually thinking over/considering/intending thoroughly the evil things all the days [i.e., all the time]). The Vulgate reads as follows: *videns autem Deus quod multa malitia hominum esset in terra et cuncta cogitatio cordis intenta esset ad malum omni tempore* (When God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and [the whole of] every reflection/meditation/consideration/reasoning of the heart/ mind was stretched/aimed/extended toward evil in every portion of time). The Peshitta reads as follows: “And the Lord perceived the greatness of the evil of man on the earth, and every inclination/bent/disposition of the thoughts/ideas/ considerations/reasonings/intentions/purposes of his heart evil throughout every day.” The Targums: And the Lord saw that great was the evil of man on the earth, and every bent/inclination/ desire of the designs of his heart/mind only evil all the day.” Therefore, it is not difficult to see that in all five versions, including the Hebrew, the emphasis and understanding are the same.

both instances it clearly means “the whole of, all, each & every.” Syntactically, therefore, there is no way one can legitimately say that here in [Genesis 6:5](#) *kol* (כֹּל) means the “general attitude of the heart.” Quite the contrary, as you will note in my footnote No. 12 above, with reference to the other versions, it means the “whole of each and every frame of the thoughts” in its context.

There are over 5,400 occurrences of the word “all” and over 700 occurrences of the word “every” in both the Old and New Testaments. Obviously I am not going to attempt to go over all of these occurrences to see if Mr. Hunt’s reasoning is applicable and correct. However, I do want to look at a few to see if his explanation and definition appear to be valid, as well as the criterion or criteria that can legitimately be appealed to for altering the meaning of “all” to something resembling Mr. Hunt’s understanding of that word in [Genesis 6:5](#).

Our first four examples are dealing with creation. The first is in [Genesis 1:21](#): “And God created the great sea monsters, and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarmed after their kind, and every winged bird after its kind; and God saw that it was good.” How should you interpret the two usages of “every” in this passage? Both words are the Hebrew word *kol* (כֹּל), which is interchangeably translated as “all” or “every.” Do these two occurrences here really mean “every,” or should you understand the meaning expressed here to be in “general”? If the latter is correct, according to Mr. Hunt’s logic and reasoning, then those who support a theistic, evolutionary process could very well be correct.

If on the other hand, “every” in this passage actually means “every,” then what you have is an all-inclusive statement about God’s creative act that would necessarily exclude theistic evolution. You then begin to see that if Mr. Hunt’s methodology of interpreting “all” and “every” is employed, then you are going to encounter some very interesting problems.

The next creation topic is in [Genesis 1:26](#): “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’”

In this instance, would you say that “all” means in “general,” or would you say it actually means “all”? If you were to say it is the former, then what is the criterion or criteria you would use to make that determination? Would that in turn mean that before the fall, there were creatures that dominated man because the “all” really means in “general”? Thus, is your criterion or criteria biblical, or is it something out of your own mind based on a preconceived agenda that is governing your interpretation?

In the third creation example in [Genesis 1:29](#), God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you.” Would you consider “every” and “all” in this verse to mean in “general”? What basis would that be true, and is that judgment based on a biblical criterion or criteria, or is it a purely subjective one?

The final example with regard to creation is in [Genesis 1:31](#): “And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.” Once again, should “all” here be interpreted as in “general,” or should it be understood to actually mean “all” as in “everything”? If it is the former, then perhaps that would be reason to accept the Gnostic belief that all matter is evil and corrupt, and thus, some of God’s creation was actually corrupt and that is why “all” in this instance should be translated to mean in “general.” Please understand, with regard to this last example, I am being utterly fallacious, but if you follow through with Mr. Hunt’s logic for his translation of “all” in [Genesis 6:5](#), then the above conclusion is something one could legitimately claim to be reasonable. However, in my opinion,

neither Mr. Hunt's logic, nor the above conclusion with regard to [Genesis 1:31](#) are valid or reasonable.

There is one place in the Old Testament that has caused some genuine concern with reference to "all" being understood as "all," versus something less than "everything," and that is in Exodus regarding the plagues. For example, concerning the gnats throughout the land of Egypt, which was the fourth sign and the third plague, we read:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats through all the land of Egypt.'" 17 And they did so; and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff, and struck the dust of the earth, and there were gnats on man and beast. All the dust of the earth became gnats through all the land of Egypt ([Exodus 8:16–17](#)).

The one problematic phrase in the above passage is in verse 17, "All the dust of the earth became gnats through all the land of Egypt." Are we to understand that "All the dust" actually became gnats? And was it actually "through all the land of Egypt"? Could it be that there is some mistake in the author's perception? Should we understand that the dust in "general" became gnats, and that this plague was in "general" throughout Egypt, but it certainly could not be "All the dust" throughout "all the land of Egypt"?

What is helpful in this particular instance is that the Hebrew word for dust is 'APHAR (עָפָר), which is speaking specifically of "loose dirt." Thus, according to the Bible, "All of the loose dirt of the earth became gnats through all the land of Egypt." The question before you, therefore, is do you want to adopt Mr. Hunt's approach with the word "all" in this passage, or would you rather believe the meaning that is obviously being expressed in these verses? I can only say that for me, I choose to go along with the obvious meaning of "all" meaning "all."

The other concern is with plagues 5 to 8. Plague No. 5 was the "severe pestilence on your livestock which are in the field, on the horses, on the donkeys, on the camels, on the herds, and on the flocks" ([Exodus 9:3](#)). And then in [9:6](#) we read: "So the LORD did this thing on the morrow, and all the livestock of Egypt died; but of the livestock of the sons of Israel, not one died." Now this would not be a problem except for the fact that in plague No. 6, concerning the boils, mention is made in [9:10](#) of the "boils breaking out with sores on man and beast." One important thing to take note of here is that it doesn't say "every beast," implying that not "every beast" was affected by these boils.

On the other hand, the question looms before us, where did these beasts come from if "all the livestock of Egypt died"? If this is all we had to go on, this would, without question, be a very credible source to use in support of Mr. Hunt's view of "all" in [Genesis 6:5](#) being "general," but not "everything," as we would normally think of "all." However, there is an important qualifier in [Exodus 9:3](#), and that is "your livestock which are in the field." The Hebrew word for "field" is שָׂדֵה (SADEH), and it is referring to an open field in the country that is used for a pasture-land, as well as an area that is also inhabited by wild beasts, and this area is outside of a walled city.¹³ That would clearly suggest that there were animals still around who were not "in the field," but perhaps were in shelters, pens, etc. that were separated from the "field" animals. Thus, whatever this plague was, it somehow affected specifically the animals "in the field," versus the animals located elsewhere.

¹³ Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 961.

Plague No. 7 was the plague of hail, and here too we read:

Behold, about this time tomorrow, I will send a very heavy hail, such as has not been seen in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. 19 “Now therefore send, bring your livestock and whatever you have in the field to safety. Every man and beast that is found in the field and is not brought home, when the hail comes down on them, will die.” ’ ’ 20 The one among the servants of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD made his servants and his livestock flee into the houses; 21 but he who paid no regard to the word of the LORD left his servants and his livestock in the field ([Exodus 9:18–21](#)).

Here too we see “livestock” mentioned in verse 19, implying there were still some left to the Egyptians after plagues 5 and 6. Thus, those animals that were sheltered were not destroyed by the hail as is stated in [9:25](#): “And the hail struck all that was in the field through all the land of Egypt, both man and beast; the hail also struck every plant of the field and shattered every tree of the field.” Once again, we have the qualifier, “in the field” with regard to those animals that were killed. In addition, we also read in this same verse that “the hail also struck every plant of the field and shattered every tree of the field.” However, in plague No. 8, which brought the locusts, we read:

And the locusts came up over all the land of Egypt and settled in all the territory of Egypt; they were very numerous. There had never been so many locusts, nor would there be so many again. 15 For they covered the surface of the whole land, so that the land was darkened; and they ate every plant of the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left. Thus nothing green was left on tree or plant of the field through all the land of Egypt ([Exodus 10:14–15](#)).

In this passage we have a qualifier concerning those plants and trees that the locusts ate, and that is they were the plants and trees “that the hail left.” In [9:25](#) we read that the hail “shattered every tree of the field,” but the qualifier “in the field” is once again important to note. Perhaps some trees were in a protected area, and even though the hail “shattered every tree of the field,” that doesn’t mean that every tree was necessarily destroyed. Some may have survived, even though “shattered,” and were still able to bear some fruit.

With regard to the “plants” destroyed by the hail, we read in [9:31–32](#): “Now the flax and the barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud. But the wheat and the spelt were not ruined, for they ripen late.” Thus, in all of these passages where questions may be brought to mind concerning the words ‘all’ and ‘every,’ we see very clear explanations why some animals, plants and trees were left, and we also see that in the context where the words “all” and “every” were used, they indeed meant “all” and “every,” versus in “general” according to Mr. Hunt’s theory.

The last example concerning the use of the word “all” has a specific reference to sin, and that is [Romans 3:23](#): “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” According to Mr. Hunt’s logic and reason, this passage could easily read, “for in general, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” This would, without question, fall into the camp of the Pelagians. Now I know that Mr. Hunt would in no way support such a reading of this verse, but his logic and reasoning cannot be divorced from such a possible application.

There is one other very important point to make with reference to [Genesis 6:5](#), and that has to do with the Hebrew word translated “intent,” *yester* (יצר). This word is actually speaking of the “forming” of the thought before it becomes a full-fledged, cognizant, expressible word in our

mind that we utter with our mouth or think of in reflective terms. For example, when preparing to pour concrete, you must first of all set a “form” in place, into which you will pour the concrete resulting in a specific configuration (e.g., a patio, a straight or curved sidewalk, etc.). The same idea is being conveyed here with reference to our thoughts. That is, the very “framing” of our thoughts is “only evil continually.”

Therefore, with regard to his interpretation of “all” in [Genesis 6:5](#), I can understand Mr. Hunt’s attempt to try and soften it in a way that would perhaps make it more amenable to himself and others who have a difficult time accepting this rather literal statement. However, in doing so, it appears to me that he has undermined the very foundation of biblical truth with regard to man’s sinful nature and the effusiveness of sin throughout every fiber of our mental and emotional being. Thus, I find his analysis of [Genesis 6:5](#) completely untenable and without any biblical mandate whatsoever. Indeed, I see it as a very dangerous interpretation and one that could potentially cause great harm and misdirection to the Body of Christ.

Elsewhere, in chapter 12 on “The Bondage of the Will,” Mr. Hunt makes a reference to Luther’s use of [Romans 3:10–12](#), concerning man’s sinful nature, and says: “Luther goes on to quote Paul’s quotation of [Psalms 14:4](#): ‘There is none that doeth good, no, not one’ ([Romans 3:10–12](#)). Like Calvin ten years later, he makes this an absolute statement about man’s unchangeable state rather than about his usual practice” (Hunt, 185). In response to Mr. Hunt’s perspective, here too, [Psalm 14:1–3](#) is rather clear about man’s nature:

The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good. 2 The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men, To see if there are any who understand, Who seek after God. 3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one.

Interestingly enough, in the Hebrew, there are three words used to translate “no,” and the one in this passage, which is used four times, is *ain*, and it is the most emphatic of all, meaning “non-existence.”¹⁴ Thus, as the “fool” says “God does not exist,” the Psalmist, inspired by the Holy Spirit, responds with, “There doesn’t exist any one doing good.” And again in verse 3, the inspired Psalmist says, “There doesn’t exist any one doing good, there doesn’t exist even one!” When reading what the Hebrew text is actually saying, there is no way that one can say syntactically, grammatically, or from a biblically based, theological perspective that these three verses are not speaking of the state of man, verses “his usual practice.”

It must be kept in mind that the reason Mr. Hunt is so insistent that man can do some good, is his attempt to refute the Calvinistic teaching that regeneration must precede faith because, according to some Calvinists, man’s depraved nature requires it so. That is, if man has no ability whatsoever to reach out to God on his own, then, according to some Calvinistic teaching, regeneration of the Spirit must occur first, enabling the individual to exercise faith in Christ for salvation.

Once again, let me say that I am in agreement with Mr. Hunt in rejecting this particular doctrine of Calvinistic teaching, but I also reject his attempt to refute this doctrine by denying that which is abundantly clear in the Scripture concerning man’s utterly sinful and corrupt state. Now although Mr. Hunt clearly affirms man’s sinfulness, his inability to save himself and his absolute necessity of turning to Christ alone for salvation, his insistence on denying the

¹⁴ The three Hebrew words are *al la*; and which is the word used here in [Psalm 14:1–3](#).

Calvinistic doctrine of regeneration before faith, at the expense of the biblical truth concerning man's utter, sinful corruption, can very easily obfuscate [Romans 3:10–23](#), [Galatians 2:20](#) and [Ephesians 2:8–10](#). The consequence of that can be a slow, but perceptible move toward a “works and performance” orientation within a veiled legalism. Such a veiled legalism in turn will misdirect and misguide, resulting in a legalistic and self-righteous bondage, versus leading people to true freedom in Christ.

One very important verse that Mr. Hunt did not refer to is [Isaiah 64:6](#), which says: “For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

The phrase “filthy garment” comes from the Hebrew words [רְגֵל עֲדִים](#) (begged *IDIM*), which mean “garment of menstruations.” In Hebrew law, when a woman was in her period, that was the apex of uncleanness for her. Therefore, this verse is saying that the very best we can do before God is comparable to a used menstrual cloth, which means that at our best, we are considered by God to be at the apex of uncleanness as compared to His holiness and righteousness. I know Mr. Hunt firmly believes this, but I do believe his effort to establish man's ability to do “good at times” is quite misleading, because we are obviously talking about two different standards of goodness; a humanistic standard, in contrast to a divine standard that far transcends anything the humanistic can even remotely approach.

In spite of the above witnesses to the clear fact of man's utter, sinful state, Mr. Hunt attempts to support his premise that the “ungodly can do good at times” (Hunt, 185) by citing numerous verses where good is “done even by the heathen and the exhortations even to the ungodly to do good” (Ibid.) are evidenced. He even gives one example of Jesus counseling “the Jews to ‘do good to them that hate you’ ([Matthew 5:44](#))” (Ibid.). However, there is one account contained in all three Synoptic Gospels that Mr. Hunt doesn't deal with concerning man's “goodness” versus God's “goodness,” and that is the account of the rich young ruler ([Matthew 19:16–22](#); [Mark 10:17–22](#); [Luke 18:18–23](#)):

And behold, one came to Him and said, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” 17 And He said to him, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments” ([Matthew 19:16–17](#)).

And as He was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and began asking Him, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone” ([Mark 10:17–18](#)).

And a certain ruler questioned Him, saying, “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” 19 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone” ([Luke 18:18–19](#)).

In Matthew, Jesus makes an interesting statement, which in essence answers the question as to whether or not we can “do good” based on God's definition of “good.” Jesus says, “Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good;...” Paul makes it quite clear “that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, ‘The righteous man shall live by faith’” ([Galatians 3:11](#)). If the rich young ruler in Matthew's account could have really kept the law and done “good” so as to gain God's approval, then the distinct possibility exists that perhaps Pelagius was correct, and we can live a sinless life whereby we are accepted by God in some way for our own “goodness.”

If indeed Mr. Hunt is correct in his exegesis of [Genesis 6:5](#) et al, then logically, the above possibility exists. However, based on what Jesus said in Matthew's account of the rich young ruler, coupled with the whole counsel of God's Word, the young man was simply blind to the depth of his sin and corruption, and his haunting lack of assurance that drove him to Jesus in the first place indicates he was very well aware that something was seriously lacking in his life.

Mark's and Luke's accounts are identical. The rich young ruler approaches Jesus and says, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone." Is this passage to be taken literally, or are we to look for some other, more surreptitious meaning behind Jesus' statement?

As for me, it is very clear, taking into account the whole counsel of God's Word, that Jesus means exactly what He says, in the same way that [Genesis 6:5](#), [Psalm 14:1–3](#) and [Isaiah 64:6](#) mean exactly what they say. Jesus was and is the God-Man, and as a man, He was unambiguously saying "No one is good except God alone!" Can we as human beings do "good" things according to a worldly standard and measure? Without question we can. However, it is quite clear from the totality of Scripture that our human measure of "goodness" versus the biblical measure are light years apart, and that is due to the fact of sin permeating every fiber of our being.

Being Drawn to Jesus—[John 6:37–39, 44](#); [Acts 16:14](#); [Luke 24:32, 45](#); [Deuteronomy 29:24](#)

The next area I want to deal with concerns Mr. Hunt's perspective on our being drawn to Jesus, which is found in [John 6](#):

All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. 38 "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. 39 "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.... No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day ([John 6:37–39, 44](#)).

Prior to looking at this section of Scripture in John, Mr. Hunt makes this statement: "Christ's words are so simple and straightforward" (Hunt, 332). I completely agree with him. The first thing I want to point out is that the phrase in verse 37, "I will certainly not cast out," is the most emphatic statement, grammatically, that can be made in the Greek.¹⁵ In other words, those who come to Jesus, by way of the Father giving them to Him, will NEVER BE SEPARATED FROM HIM!

Verse 44, on the other hand, as simply stated as it is, has generated a great deal of debate and disagreement. The first thing to be observed is the phrase, "No one can come to Me, unless ...". The word *can* literally means "to be able, capable, or have the power" to do something. Thus, in this simple, unqualified statement, Jesus is saying that "No one is able, capable or has the power to come to Me, unless ...". The *unless* gives us the essential means by which we, as human beings, "are able, capable and have the power" to come to Christ. Jesus says that means is "unless the Father who sent me draws him; ...".

¹⁵ The phrase in the Greek is οὐ μὴ ἐκβάλω ἐξω. This is the subjunctive of emphatic negation, and it means that whatever it is speaking about is an ABSOLUTE CERTAINTY, without any alteration WHATSOEVER!

The word *draws* is the key word in this passage that has “drawn” so much controversy. The word in the Greek is *HELKO* ἔλκω), and it means to “draw by inward power, lead, impel, drag.” The last meaning for this word is the one that gives people a lot of trouble. However, the context is what helps considerably in determining which meaning is best applicable. The meaning “drag” is used in [Acts 21:30](#) concerning Paul where “they dragged him out of the temple; ...” This was an obvious coercion of Paul against his desire.

On the other hand, although “drag” doesn’t appear to fit the context in [John 6:44](#), the idea of “leading and impelling” certainly does. In addition, the tense of the word “draws” in this instance emphasizes the beginning¹⁶ of the drawing process in light of the fact that “No one has the power, ability, or capability to come to Me unless, the Father who sent Me draws him; ...” Therefore, no human has the capability within himself of coming to the Son unless the Father should “draw, lead and impel” him to come. In addition, every person whom the Father gives to Jesus will come to Him, and Jesus will never at any time “cast out” that believer.

Exegetically, however, Mr. Hunt is correct in saying “Christ does not say that everyone who is drawn will actually come to Him and be saved ... but all whom He gives to the Son, will come to Him, and He will lose none of them whom the Father gives Him; ...” (Hunt, 334). On the other hand, the ONLY reason anyone CAN come to Jesus and be saved eternally is because the Father has given that person to Jesus, and He, the Father, “draws/leads/impels” him to Christ by the power of His Holy Spirit.

Thus, to sum up this passage, we can say that, based on the simple and straightforward reading of the text, all that the Father gives to His Son shall come to His Son, and He will never at any time cast them out. In addition, those whom the Father gives to the Son, He “leads, impels and draws” them to His Son by the convicting power of His Holy Spirit. Otherwise, if He didn’t draw them, no one has the “capability, ability or power” within himself to come to Christ apart from the Holy Spirit convicting and drawing him to the place of making that final decision to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Now on the one hand, Mr. Hunt agrees with the above, biblical scenario, but on the other hand, he will make statements like the following one based on [Deuteronomy 6:5](#) that “This is proof enough that all men have the power of choice necessary to love God and to receive His love, though all fail to keep this commandment just as they fail to keep the others” (Hunt, 288). [Deuteronomy 6:5](#) reads: “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” Now if Mr. Hunt thinks this passage implies that I “have the power of choice necessary to love God and receive His love,” then I must also have the power to keep not only this commandment, but all the others as well, even though he says “though all fail to keep this commandment just as they fail to keep the others.”

However, if Mr. Hunt is correct about me having “the power of choice necessary to love God,” then in spite of my failure to not keep this particular commandment as I should, based on his logic, the possibility does exist that I can keep this commandment, as well as all the others, and in turn I can establish my own righteousness through keeping the Law. The problem with this logic is that it runs contrary to what Paul says in Galatians:

¹⁶The word “draw” is an aorist, active subjunctive, and I would view it in this instance as an ingressive aorist due to the fact that the action emphasized in this verse is the inability of someone to come to Jesus apart from the Father drawing him. Thus, it is God who initiates the action of drawing.

I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly... For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.” 11 Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” 12 However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, “He who practices them shall live by them.” 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” ([Galatians 2:21](#); [3:10–13](#)).

Once again, I know that Mr. Hunt doesn’t believe that we can establish our own righteousness through keeping the Law and thereby gain entry into heaven, but if you follow the logic of his above statement, that is exactly where it can lead, and that was the type of argument that Pelagius and his followers pursued.

In chapter 20, Mr. Hunt says, with reference to [John 6:44](#), that: “The element of the Father ‘drawing’ is mentioned by Christ only in this one passage” (Hunt, 334). That statement is both accurate and inaccurate. While it is true that this is the only place where the word “draw” is used in this context, it is not the only place where it is implied that apart from God working to bring someone to a point of belief, they will not come to believe and trust in Him.

In [Acts 16:14](#) we read: “And a certain woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” This is a rather factual statement, and if this was the only verse in the entire Bible expressing such an action by God, then perhaps one could legitimately say that this in no way implies that Lydia could not have opened her heart herself. However, this verse does not stand alone, and taken in its context, it is clearly stating that had the Lord not “opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul,” then her heart would not have been opened.

The structure of this verse is quite interesting. First of all, it says she “was listening” to what Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke were saying to the women at the riverside outside the gate at Philippi. In other words, she was exercising her natural ability to hear and absorb the words being spoken by these men. However, these were not the words of some new, Greek, philosophical concept, nor were they words of some religious palaver concerning Jewish mysticism, etc., but rather they were the very words of Life in Christ, about which “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” ([II Corinthians 4:4](#)). Thus, her ability to understand the Word of God was to come from a totally different dimension that far transcended the different levels of natural, comprehensive ability her mind may have had in understanding other disciplines of learning.

Then, as she “was listening” with her natural ear, “the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul.” The Greek word for “opened” is *DIANOIGO* (διανοίγω), and from this is derived the English word *diagnose*. The basic meaning for this word in the Greek is:

to open by dividing or drawing asunder (διὰ), to open thoroughly (what has been closed); ... to open the sense of the Scriptures, explain them, [Lk. 24:32](#); τὸν νοῦν τίνας open the mind of one, i.e. cause him to understand a thing, [Lk. 24:45](#); τὴν καρδίαν to

open one's soul, i.e. to rouse in one the faculty of understanding or the desire of learning, Acts 16:14, ...¹⁷

As the above quote indicates, this word is also used in Luke 24:32 where Jesus “was explaining the Scriptures” to two of the disciples who were on the road to Emmaus, and then in Luke 24:45, “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,” referring to “the eleven and those who were with them” (Luke 24:33). Clearly, in both these instances, the understanding of Scripture was dependent upon Jesus opening the minds of the listeners (i.e., His disciples), and the exact same thing is stated in Acts 16:14.

However, after the opening, then the choice is there for the person to either say, “yes, Lord, I believe and follow you,” or “no, Lord, I will not follow you.” But the Scripture is abundantly clear that had the Lord not explained the Scripture or opened the “minds” and “heart” of His disciples and Lydia, then they would have never understood the Scripture, let alone been moved to make a decision to follow Jesus. And why is this so? It is because of the fact that sin had so blinded their hearts and minds that they COULD NOT begin to understand the things of God unless the Holy Spirit opened their minds to do so, and they COULD NOT come to Christ on their own initiative apart from the Holy Spirit drawing them to Him in order to make that decision.

The last Scripture I want to look at with regard to God needing to bring a man to a place of making a decision to believe in Him is in Deuteronomy 29. In the beginning of this chapter Moses is giving his final exhortation and blessing to the Israelites. In Deuteronomy 29:2–4, we read:

And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, “You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh and all his servants and all his land; 3 the great trials which your eyes have seen, those great signs and wonders. 4 “Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.”

The phrase in verse 4 is set forth quite simply and clearly. According to Moses, the ability of the people to “know, hear and see” the things of God was not within themselves to do so (John 6:44; Acts 16:14; Luke 24:32, 45), but rather it must come from God. On the other hand, we read in Romans 1:18ff that God has made himself known to the world of humanity as a whole:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures (Romans 1:18–23).

¹⁷ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 140.

How can it be, concerning the Israelites, that Moses could say, “the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear,” and then Paul could say something like the above in Romans? Well, it appears that the type of knowledge being described in [Romans 1](#) is called General Revelation. That is, revelation that is given to every man concerning the reality of God and a sense of moral accountability.

On the other hand, the knowledge described in [Deuteronomy 29:4](#) appears to be of an intimate type, leading to a personal relationship with God that comes through repentance and faith in Him, which is what is described in [John 6:37–39 & 44](#). In addition, later on in chapter 30 of Deuteronomy, Moses calls on the people to “choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants” ([Deuteronomy 30:19](#)). Thus, here too, the people are given the command to choose, and that is based on God having opened their spiritual heart, eyes and ears to know, see and hear, thereby they became fully responsible for their decision either to accept or reject God’s offer.

Thus, it is not an “either or,” but rather a “both and” when it comes to man’s corrupt sinful nature and his inability to save himself, and God’s intervening grace through the power of the Holy Spirit to draw men to that place of repentance and faith in Christ. Thus, while at the same time we are called on to “choose life” when the Word is set before us, it is God who must open our hearts, by the power of His Holy Spirit, to enable us to understand, see and hear, and it has always been that way. In fact, this is what we see stated in [Deuteronomy 30:11–14](#), and is also quoted by Paul in [Romans 10:8–13](#):

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. 12 “It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 13 “Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ 14 “But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” ([Deuteronomy 30:11–14](#)).

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart”—that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; 10 for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; 13 for “Whoever will call upon the name of the LORD will be saved” ([Romans 10:8–13](#)).

From a metaphorical perspective, it is as though God places faith in our mouths as a morsel of food, but we must make the decision to either chew and swallow it, or spit it out. This coincides with the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, described by Jesus in [John 16:8–11](#), in which a person is brought face to face with the truth of his sin; with the truth that only through Jesus is there any hope of forgiveness for his sin and eternal life; and with the truth of the eternal judgment that awaits him if he rejects Christ. However, according to Scripture, if God doesn’t open a person’s heart and mind to see these truths, that person will not open them himself through his own initiative.

Ordained or Disposed to Eternal Life?—[Acts 13:48](#)

We will now look at Mr. Hunt’s interpretation of [Acts 13:48](#): “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been

appointed to eternal life believed.” In his book, Mr. Hunt deals with this verse in chapter 14 entitled, “Is Salvation Available to All?” Mr. Hunt opts for the meaning *disposed* versus *appointed*. It is a disputed meaning among different schools of thought, but Mr. Hunt quite honestly shares with his readers why he chose the former meaning instead of the latter: “The meaning is at least allowable from the word *tasso* and it seems to be demanded by the context. Why not accept it? Because to do so would undermine Calvinism. We find no other reason” (Hunt, 211).

Mr. Hunt certainly has the right and privilege to choose any meaning for a word that he wants and for any reason he wants. However, with all due respect to him, I don’t know if that is the best of reasons for making that choice here.

The two words translated for “had been appointed” are *ESAN TETAGMENOI* (ἔσαν τεταγμένοι), and they are written together for added emphasis. *TETAGMENOI* emphasizes an act that was completed some time in the past, and in this instance it has an ongoing, continuous affect in the past because *ESAN* is attached to it, which makes that meaning even more emphatic.¹⁸ In addition, the word *tasso* (τάσσω), which is the root form of the verb *TETAGMENOI*, means “to put in place, to station, to assign, to appoint, to ordain, to order, to arrange, to settle and to agree upon.”

Mr. Hunt uses a source entitled *The Bible Commentary*, by Frederic C. Cook, in which Mr. Cook makes reference to the Syriac supporting the translation being *disposed*, versus *ordained*. The word in Syriac is *som* (ܣܘܡ), and it too means “to set up, to constitute, to determine, to appoint, to ordain, to affirm, to declare, to set the heart and to turn the mind.”

On the one hand, Mr. Hunt doesn’t feel that “ordained” fits in with the total picture of biblical redemption, but on the other hand, what we clearly have in this passage is not an “either or,” but rather a “both and.” The problem for Mr. Hunt with taking the definition “disposed” is that syntactically, the correct meaning of the passive voice used with this verb indicates someone or something acted upon the subjects to cause them to become “disposed,” with the result being they “believed.” The same is true for the definition “ordained,” in that the passive voice indicates an action being done to the subjects by someone or something beyond themselves, with the result being they also “believed.”¹⁹

However, whichever definition you may feel inclined toward accepting, the syntax of the verb indicates someone or something acted upon them and spawned their response. This action in turn brought them to the point where they “believed,” and this belief had an effect for a long time in the past, that is, up to the end of their lives on this earth, and then into eternity.

Thus, if they were “disposed,” someone or something caused them to become “disposed.” Based on what we have looked at up to this point, that someone was the Holy Spirit, bringing

¹⁸ This phrase is a periphrastic pluperfect participle that is formed by combining the imperfect of ἐμί with a perfect participle. This construction can be both intensive in its emphasis, as well as focusing on the consummation of an act. Consequently, in this instance, I would conclude that both ideas are present; God is the one who initiated the opening of their hearts to believe, and the people in turn followed through with their commitment to Christ.

¹⁹ The participle τεταγμένοι (*TETAGMENOI*) is a perfect, passive participle, indicating that someone or something was acting upon the agent to bring about whatever is being described. Thus, in this passage, they were either “appointed” by God, or they were “disposed” as a result of the Lord opening up their hearts by the conviction of the Holy Spirit to receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

them to a place of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ after opening up their hearts to understand the Gospel. If it is “ordained,” then here too it was the Holy Spirit, based on God’s predetermined plan, bringing them to a place of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ after opening up their hearts to understand the Gospel, the same as He did for those who were “disposed.”

Is Faith a Gift?—Ephesians 2:8–9; Romans 10:17; Hebrews 12:2; Galatians 2:20; Acts 3:16

The idea of “faith” being a gift from God appears to be quite intensely opposed by Mr. Hunt. In particular, he focuses on [Ephesians 2:8–9](#) where we read: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.” In chapter 21 entitled, “Persuasion, the Gospel and God,” Mr. Hunt asserts rather forcefully that “faith” is not a gift from God. He says, “Furthermore, the construction of the Greek in [Ephesians 2:8–10](#) makes it impossible for faith to be the gift” (Hunt, 361). The section in chapter 21 in which he covers this passage is called, “Is Faith, or Salvation, the Gift of God?,” and he finishes up this section with a very strong declaration:

Furthermore, even if saving faith were the gift (which it could not be), there is nothing in [Ephesians 2](#) (or anywhere else) to indicate that it is irresistibly given by God only after He has sovereignly regenerated the totally depraved sinner and not before. Indeed, that very passage says we are “saved, through faith”; i.e., faith is the means of our salvation/regeneration, not something which follows it (Hunt, 362).

I do agree with Mr. Hunt in his last statement, “faith is the means of our salvation/regeneration, not something which follows it.” However, in a similar fashion to his handling the subject of man’s sinfulness, so too here, Mr. Hunt, in his sincere desire to expunge what he sees as doctrine that “mocks God,” makes some statements that may be seen not to be entirely correct after a more careful examination. Once again, however, I want to point out that it is irrelevant whether or not the following analysis of this passage supports or abrogates Calvinism or any other “ism,” but what is quite relevant is whether or not it supports biblical truth. And if the following analysis is a presentation of biblical truth, then we certainly need to embrace it, regardless of who accepts or rejects it.

Mr. Hunt is correct in his statement that the demonstrative pronoun, *TOUITO* (τοῦτο), which is “that,” is neuter and “faith,” *PISTIS* (πίστις), is a feminine noun. Indeed, that which *TOUITO* is modifying is the word “gift,” or *DORON* (δῶρον), which is a neuter noun. The question before us is, what is “gift” referring to? Is it talking about salvation as a whole, and would it then include “faith,” or is it talking about “faith,” since the word “grace,” *CHARIS* (χάρις), is already understood to be a “gift”? I don’t think anyone would deny the fact that “gift” is clearly referring to salvation as a whole. However, are there instances where *TOUITO* might be referring to something other than a neuter noun?

In [Matthew 6:25](#), Jesus says: “For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?” The word “reason” is *TOUITO* (τοῦτο), and what is *TOUITO* referring to? Is it referring to EVERYTHING Jesus was talking about in the verses before, which included many nouns of all three genders (the word “treasure” is a masculine noun, “heart” is a feminine noun and “body” is a neuter noun)?

Someone might suggest that *TOUITO* is referring to the exhortation Jesus is giving in verse 25 about not being “anxious.” However, the Greek word used here is the imperative form of the verb *MERIMNAO* (μεριμνάω) and its nominal form, which means “anxiety,” is a feminine noun, *MERIMNA* (μέριμνα). It would appear fairly obvious, therefore, that *TOUITO* is referring to the whole of what Jesus was saying, both before and after verse 25.

Another example of the neuter, demonstrative pronoun referring to something other than a neuter noun is in [Matthew 4:8–9](#): “Again, the devil took Him to a very high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world, and their glory; and he said to Him, ‘All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me.’ ”

In this passage, we have the nominative, neuter, plural, demonstrative pronoun, *TAUTA* (ταῦτα), versus the nominative, neuter, singular demonstrative pronoun, *TOUITO* (τοῦτο). As you look at the passage, therefore, you will discover that it contains one neuter noun, “mountain,” one masculine noun, “world” and two feminine nouns, “kingdoms” and “glory.” If we include all of these nouns in the “these things,” then we certainly have more than neuters. On the other hand, if one were to insist that the “these things” only refers to “mountain,” then why didn’t Satan say, “all this (τοῦτο—referring to the singular, neuter word for “mountain”) will I give You, if You fall down and worship me”? It is fairly clear, therefore, that Satan was referring to all of the “things” he was talking about in verse 8, including the two feminine nouns as well. The upshot of all this, therefore, is that *TOUITO*, in [Ephesians 2:8–9](#), is being used in an inclusive manner so as to embrace the whole of salvation as the “gift of God,” and that certainly includes “faith” as integral and essential to our salvation.

The next passage dealing with “faith” as a gift from God is in [Romans 10:17](#): “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” Clearly this verse is stating that divine, saving “faith” is not something we generate on our own, but rather it is something that is given to us by God through His Word. The exact phrase in an amplified setting is, “So faith comes out of hearing, and hearing out of/from/by means of the Word of God.”²⁰ Thus, the Word of God is the source of our saving and living faith, and hearing is the channel through which that faith is appropriated in our hearts and minds. The hearing, of course, is not simply a literal “hearing” with the natural ear, but rather a hearing with the heart and mind whereby the Holy Spirit opens up our understanding, through the power of his conviction, to see we are sinners, that Jesus is the only way and that judgment awaits us if we refuse Him ([John 16:8–11](#)). This applies to salvation first of all, and then to our daily growth and walk of faith as a believer in Christ.

Next, in [Hebrews 12:2](#) we are told that Jesus is both the “originator” and “developer” of our faith: “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” However, the first emphasis is that of “fixing our eyes on Jesus.” The word “fixing,”

²⁰ The phrase in Greek is ἄρα ἡ πίστις ἐξ ἀκοῆς ἢ δὲ ἀκοῆς διὰ ῥήματος Χριστοῦ. I view the word ἀκοῆς (hearing) as an ablative of means, and ῥήματος Χριστοῦ (word of Christ) as an ablative of source. Thus, the source of faith is the “Word of Christ,” and the means by which that faith is received and embraced in a person’s heart is through “hearing.” Of course, this doesn’t necessarily mean literal hearing with the natural ear because some people may be deaf. But it comes through the “hearing” of understanding whereby the Holy Spirit opens up the heart through his conviction, enabling someone to understand.

APHORONTES ἀφορῶντες), is emphasizing an ongoing, continuous action.²¹ The implication being that if I, as a believer, do not “continually fix” my eyes (i.e., my mind and spirit) on Jesus, I will not grow in faith, and thus, I will have no personal victory over sin. Thus, my growth in faith is directly proportional to my abiding in Christ through abiding in His Word, prayer, trusting and surrendering to Him.

All of this is possible because Jesus is both the “author and perfecter of faith, ...” The word for “author” is *ARCHEGOS* (ἀρχηγός), and it means both originator (i.e., the One who founded and began my faith within me—[Romans 10:17](#)) and example (i.e., the One who set forth the example of faith and trust in God for me to follow—[Luke 9:23–24](#)).²² The word for “perfecter” is *TELEIOTES* (τελειωτής), and it comes from the verb *TELEIOO* (τελειόω), which means “to complete, finish and bring to an end an activity” in a very assured and certain manner.²³ In Jesus, therefore, our “faith” as believers will be fully consummated, and the work He is doing in our lives is to bring us to that final consummation in heaven.

²¹ This is a present active participle from ἀφοράω, and its emphasis is that of a continuous, ongoing action.

²² a. The “hero” of a city, who founded it, often gave it his name and became its guardian, as, e.g., Athene for Athens ... (ἀρχηγέτις). This gives us already b. the “originator” or “author”.... In Philo the term ἀρχηγέτις is mostly used for the patriarchs or Adam or Noah (a.). With special pride he calls Abraham the ἀρχηγέτις of the Jews (Abr., 9, 276; Vit. Mos., I, 7). On one occasion, however, he uses the word in a bold metaphor for God as the Creator and Father of all things (Ebr., 42). In the LXX the ἀρχηγός is usually the political or military “leader” of the whole people, or of a part of it. It is usually the equivalent of ἀρὸ ρχ, or αψχινῷ, or of the κῆ elected in time of emergency. In the Chronicler it is also used for var W.F the “head” of the clan.... The concept is more deeply rooted in the circle of specific Christian thinking at Hb. 2:10. Christ is the ἀρχηγός τῆς σωτηρίας. He leads many brethren to the honour or glory, which is the end of σωτηρία. By His suffering He accomplishes His work as the “Author” of salvation. In 12:2 He is similarly called the “Author” and “Founder” of Christian faith (ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν), and more particularly, according to the context, of the resultant moral consequences. Yet Jesus is also ἀρχηγὸν καὶ τελειωτὴν in the sense that as the first man He gave an example of faith in God, that by His death He “fulfilled” this faith in God’s unconditional love and its overcoming of the barrier of sin, and that He thereby gave this love concrete and once-for-all actualization in the history of salvation. (Gerhard Kittel & Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 487-8). These are, therefore, two very important appellations to be affixed to Jesus, and they are also a source of incredible comfort and encouragement to us, His children, to know that He is working in and through us to conform us to His image ([Romans 8:29](#); [Philippians 2:12–13](#); [Hebrews 13:20–21](#)).

²³ The verbs τελέω and τελειόω coincide in the NT especially in the sense “to carry through,” “to complete” ... Whereas this is the chief meaning of τελέω, the thought of totality is stronger in the case of τελειόω, ... The findings suggest for τελέω the meanings of τέλος, “goal,” “issue,” “end” ... and for τελειόω those of τέλειος, “whole,” “complete,” “perfect” ... (Kittel, vol. 8, 84). Thus, here too it is quite clear that the plan and manifest purpose of God for His children is to bring us to completion in Jesus. Paul says as much in [Philippians 1:6](#): “For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

The next passage concerning “faith” as a gift is [Galatians 2:20](#), wherein we are told that the faith we live by is also from Jesus: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me.” The phrase “by faith in the Son of God” may also be read, “by faith from the Son of God.”²⁴ That is, this “faith” that Paul lived by had its origin in Christ, which is what we have seen in [Romans 10:17](#) and in [Hebrews 12:2](#). It is also placed in Christ, who alone is our source and strength! Thus, both readings may be viewed as expressing two truths in one phrase. Our faith is both from Christ, as well as placed in Him, trusting Him to live His life in and through us, while walking and living in the promises of His Word.

And finally, in [Acts 3:16](#), we discover that divine faith, in all aspects, comes through Jesus: “And on the basis of faith in His name, it is the name of Jesus which has strengthened this man whom you see and know; and the faith which comes through Him has given him this perfect health in the presence of you all.” Here, Peter is explaining to the people who have run to see the miracle of healing that just took place with the lame man, how this healing occurred. Peter is saying that it is not only “on the basis of faith in His name (i.e., the name of Jesus),” but also it is by “the faith which comes through Him (i.e., Jesus)” that this lame man has been healed.

However, there are those who would see the “through Him” as not necessarily referring to Jesus. They see it as perhaps an allusion to Peter, or maybe even the lame man. If Peter is somehow referring to himself, then that would seem to be a contradiction of [Acts 3:12](#), in which Peter is attempting to turn the attention away from himself and John and to the Lord. In addition, that would have been a very awkward way for Peter to refer to himself, “through him,” versus “through me,” which would seem more reasonable since Peter was the one doing the talking.

Others see “through him” as referring to the lame man himself, but there are two distinct views regarding this position. One is that it is the lame man’s own faith, which came “through him [and] has given him this perfect health...” But if that is the case, then why the emphasis in the “name” of Jesus as being the source of his healing? If the faith to be healed came in and through this man alone, then he really doesn’t need Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or anything else, but all he needs is his own faith to believe for whatever he wants. If that is the case, then here again, perhaps Pelagius was right! But Pelagius wasn’t right, and neither can this view be correct in the light of the whole counsel of God’s Word.

The other similar view is that “through him” is referring to the lame man, but the faith is from Jesus and has worked in and “through him,” that is, the lame man, resulting in his “perfect health in the presence of you all.” This is quite similar to the position that the “Him” is Jesus, but

²⁴ The phrase in Greek is ἐν πίστει ζωῆς τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ, and this may be seen as either a subjective genitive (i.e., producing the action being described), or an objective genitive (i.e., receiving the action being described). If it is the subjective genitive, then the translation would be “the faith from the Son of God,” in which Jesus is generating the faith. On the other hand, if it is the objective genitive, then the translation would be “faith in the Son of God,” wherein Jesus is now the object of where I am placing my faith. Grammatically and syntactically this can be either. Therefore, I see it as a “both, and,” versus an “either, or.” That is, both aspects of faith are represented because both are true. In addition, the definite article τῆ is modifying “faith,” both being in the dative case. Thus, the reading could be, “I live by faith, which in itself is from the Son of God,” or, “I live by faith, which finds its source and power in the Son of God.”

in this latter view, the faith is actually seen as flowing in and through the man from Jesus, culminating in his complete healing.

Now although divine, saving faith may clearly be seen in the above passages as a “gift of God,” we are not automatons, but rather we are individuals who must say, once our eyes have been opened by the Holy Spirit to see the truth, “Yes, Lord, I believe and trust You as my Lord and Savior,” otherwise, we have no salvation! And, subsequent to salvation, we have both the responsibility and the freedom from the Lord to either say, “Yes, Lord, I will obey and follow you in the faith that you have given and are perfecting within Me through Your Word, by the power of your indwelling Holy Spirit,” or “No, Lord, I will not obey you in faith in this particular matter because I am afraid You won’t keep Your Word.” That choice is ours to make, and He enables and allows us to do either.

Predestination, Election & Foreknowledge—Acts 2:22–23; 4:27–28

Mr. Hunt’s view of “predestination/election/foreknowledge” is quite interesting, and if he is correct in what he says, he, along with others who hold this view, will have unraveled one of the most difficult issues in biblical theology. On the other hand, if he is incorrect, then the theological damage done to those who would embrace this view of predestination would be equal to the damage caused by his incorrect view of man’s sin nature in such passages as [Genesis 6:5](#), [Psalm 14:1–3](#), et al. Therefore, what is at stake is not Calvinism, Arminianism, or any other “ism,” but the very heart of biblical truth.

Mr. Hunt states his position on predestination quite clearly and unambiguously in the following quote:

What about the statements in the Bible that certain ones have been predestined, or elected? We will examine those scriptures and in the process we will see that in the Bible predestination/election is never unto salvation. To the Calvinist, however, predestination/election is always and only unto salvation—a view which is imposed wrongly upon Scripture. In fact, election/predestination is always unto specific blessings that accompany salvation, but not to salvation itself (Hunt, 211).

According to Mr. Hunt, at no time is predestination/election ever unto salvation, but rather always unto some spiritual blessing for God’s children subsequent to salvation.

Mr. Hunt reinforces this belief in the following quote where he emphasizes what he sees as the order of salvation:

Surely the most obvious possibility would be that God foreknew who would repent and believe the gospel and on that basis He predestined them to something unique: “to be conformed to the image of his Son” and “unto obedience”. . . . The most straightforward interpretation of these scriptures is that knowing in advance who would believe the gospel, God made certain that those individuals heard the gospel, and He predestined them to partake of the many blessings He planned to bestow on the redeemed throughout eternity (Hunt, 225 & 229).

Thus, according to Mr. Hunt, foreknowledge always precedes predestination, and foreknowledge is simply God seeing ahead of time what man will do (e.g., seeing those men who will accept Jesus as Savior, etc.) and then predetermining or “arranging” that event based on what he saw in advance. Thus, the determining factor in predestination, according to Mr. Hunt, is

man's action, and then God follows along and predetermines or "arranges" what He sees man will already do in order to accomplish His will:

This inspired statement by Peter on the Day of Pentecost concerning Christ's betrayal and crucifixion (Mr. Hunt is referring to [Acts 2:23](#)) provides important insight into God's outworking of His eternal plan. It clearly reveals that even in declaring future events through His prophets and accomplishing them in history according to His will, God takes into account what He by foreknowledge knows will be the actions and reactions of men. He did not cause Judas to betray Christ, nor did He cause the Jews to reject Him or the Romans to crucify Him. However, He did arrange that these particular individuals who would act in that manner were on the scene at the right time to fulfill His will through their willing ignorance and/or evil (Hunt, 226).

This position is not unique to Mr. Hunt, but he states this belief with such a dogmatic certitude that he leaves no room for any other consideration.

In [Acts 2:22–23](#), we read:

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know— 23 this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.

The phrase "the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God" is what Mr. Hunt is referring to in the above quote when he speaks of "This inspired statement by Peter." The word for "predetermined" is *HORIDZO* (ὀρίζω), and its basic meaning is that of "setting limits in order to define and explain something in a more delineated and specific fashion." Consequently, when applied to people or events, it means "to determine, appoint, fix or set something or someone in a very specific and established manner." What is even more interesting is that the form for *HORIDZO* in this instance is a perfect, passive participle, which is modifying "plan." Thus, the literal rendering of this phrase would be "the having been determined/appointed/fix/set plan." The perfect tense indicates a completed action with an ongoing and continuous result. Therefore, this was something that was determined from eternity in a fixed and set plan, as far as the time, place and persons involved.

The word for "plan" in the Greek is *boule* (βουλή), and its basic meaning is "plan, purpose, intention, resolution & decision." This noun comes from the Greek verb *BOULOMAI* (βούλομαι), and its primary meaning is "to desire to have or experience something, with the implication of planning in order to fulfill that desire." What is interesting in this verb, from which the noun *boule* is derived, is that the decision to act is not based on foreseen events that will occur, and then the action is planned, but rather the decision is based on the desire for something to occur, and then the action is planned in order to bring it to pass. The noun in turn contains that same inference.

The word for "foreknowledge" is *prognosis* (πρόγνωσις), and its basic meaning is "forethought, prearrangement or predetermination." The verb from which this noun is derived is *PROGINOSKO* (προγινώσκω), and its basic meaning is "to know beforehand, or to choose beforehand."

The question before us, therefore, is, does "knowing beforehand," with reference to God, mean that God knows what we will do, and, therefore, He makes his predetermined plan based

on what we are going to do? Or does “knowing beforehand,” with reference to God, mean that He knows us, and all that is going to happen, because of His predetermined plan? The former is Mr. Hunt’s position, but is that the correct one?

If God, according to Mr. Hunt, makes his plans based on what He sees we are going to do, then who is actually in control? Is God in control, or are we, as created, sinful and fallen human beings in control? It would seem that if God’s “predetermination” is based on those decisions that we first make, then we are the ones who are actually predetermining what God is going to do. Consequently, that would appear that we, who are finite human beings, are in control of God and the universe, and not the other way around.

However, Mr. Hunt’s main objection to the idea of foreknowledge being God’s choosing beforehand is that it would be redundantly repeating “predestined.” For example, in [Romans 8:29](#), if foreknowledge were the same as predestination, it would read, “whom he did predestinate he also did predestinate” (Hunt, 226). To hopefully give a bit more clarity to this dilemma, an amplified translation of [Acts 2:23](#), based on the expanded meanings above, would, therefore, read as follows: “this Man, having been delivered up according to God’s desired plan and fulfilled decision to do so through His predetermination, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death.” As you can see in the above, amplified translation, there doesn’t appear to be any redundancy, or confusion as to God’s purpose and plan in His fulfilled decision.

Another important text in this same venue is [Acts 4:27–28](#) where we read:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.

Peter is leading the disciples in a prayer of thanksgiving after he and John had been arrested and commanded to no longer teach or preach in Jesus’ name after the healing of the lame man at the temple. In this passage, “foreknowledge” doesn’t appear in conjunction with “predestined,” but “purpose” does, and the word for “purpose” is the exact same word for “plan” in [Acts 2:23](#), *boule* (βουλή). In addition, the word for “predestined” in Greek is *PROORIDZO* (προορίζω), and its basic meaning is “to decide upon beforehand.” Thus, an amplified reading of [Acts 4:28](#) would be as follows: “to do whatever Thy hand and Thy fulfilled decision determined to do beforehand.” Now even though “foreknowledge” doesn’t occur in this verse, the meaning expressed in this passage is identical in scope and content as that expressed in [Acts 2:23](#).

The question needing to be asked, therefore, is regardless of and in spite of any “isms” that people try and cloak the Scripture with in order to support their preferred beliefs, or to reject beliefs that don’t fit in with their particular, sanctioned theology, is the Scripture true, or is it not in what it is declaring? That is the question that you the reader must ask yourself in your decision making.

As quoted earlier, Mr. Hunt doesn’t believe that “predestination/election” is ever unto salvation, but rather unto blessing for those who are saved. He says: “Before proceeding further, it is vital to realize that neither in these passages nor anywhere else does election or predestination refer to salvation but always and only to particular benefits” (Hunt, 219). Now granted, the above two passages we looked at in Acts do not have anything to do with “salvation” as far as being directly related to individuals, but they most definitely have everything to do with God’s overall sovereignty and how that sovereignty affects us in our daily lives, which would certainly include our salvation.

Individual Salvation & Predestination—Ephesians 1:3–12; I Peter 1:2; Romans 8:28–30; Romans 9:6–13

This next and last topic follows right on the heels of the previous subject of Predestination, Election & Foreknowledge, and that is Individual Salvation & Predestination. As I pointed out in the previous discussion, Mr. Hunt adamantly denies any relation, whatsoever, between predestination/election and salvation. Therefore, in this final section of our biblical analysis, I want to look at the above passages to see if there is any connection between salvation and Predestination, Election & Foreknowledge. The first one I would like to examine is [Ephesians 1:3–12](#):

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love 5 He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. 7 In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, 8 which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight 9 He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him 10 with a view to an administration suitable to the fulness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him 11 also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, 12 to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.

As you read the above passage, it doesn't take a knowledge of Greek to be able to read in these verses the clear and simple message of salvation in Christ and all that means to us in our life on this earth, as well as our going home to be in glory. Verses 4 & 5 are rather straightforward in their statement of our salvation in Christ, which includes our sanctification in Christ as we grow in Him. In verse 4, the word "chose" is an aorist middle, *EXELEXATO* (ἐξελέξατο), and that means that God Himself chose us specifically in Christ for salvation, as well as for the totality of all the blessings that accompany that salvation.²⁵

The statement in verse 5 that "He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself" is about as plain and simple as it gets. What does "adoption as sons through Jesus Christ" actually mean? The word for adoption in Greek is *HUIOTHESIA* (υιοθεσία), and it comes from two Greek words: *HUIOS* (υἱός), which means, "son," and *thesis* (θέσις), which means, "position." Thus, combined, they mean "sonposition," which means we are put in a position as His sons, or "adoption/sonship," through Jesus' death and sacrifice on the Cross. That means we were saved, forgiven and placed in Christ by the Holy Spirit and now BELONG TO HIM!

Once again, in as plain and simple terms as can be stated for me, a believer, I have become a child of God; I am saved; I am redeemed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; and I have eternal life in Him! This appears to me to be pointing quite clearly, specifically and unambiguously to

²⁵ This is clearly a constative aorist, in which the whole of one's life in Christ is viewed as a single unit, including being brought to Christ and born again, all the way through one's life on this earth as a believer in Christ, and finally to be taken home to be with the Lord for all eternity.

salvation in Christ, and to deny such is tantamount to denying the obvious for the sake of some personal agenda that contravenes the clear teaching of Scripture. In addition, in verse 12 Paul says that he and others of his time were the “first to hope in Christ,” and what does that mean if it is not referring to salvation? The word for *hope* here in the Greek is a *HAPAX LEGOMENON*, meaning it is used only once in the New Testament. In Greek it is pronounced, *PROELPIDZO* (προελπίζω), which means, “to be the first to hope.” In addition, it is a perfect, active participle, and, therefore, it is emphasizing a completed act that has an ongoing, continuous affect. Thus, at some time in the past, Paul and others placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and, as a result of that act of repentance and faith in Christ, they are now saved and will remain so throughout eternity! Once again, this certainly appears to be about salvation, as well as all the other blessings that attend our salvation in Christ.

There are some other very interesting syntactical matters in this passage that are essential to our understanding of the relationship between predestination, election, foreknowledge and salvation that I want to examine. These points will in turn be linked with the other passages we will explore in this section.

In *Ephesians 1:3–12*, there are six participles, four aorist, one perfect and one present. The perfect participle is used substantially in verse 6 when referring to Jesus as the “Beloved.” The present participle is used in verse 11 in referring to God “who works all things after the counsel of His will.” The four aorist participles, however, are quite significant in their usage with regard to predestination, election, foreknowledge and salvation.

The aorist participle is significant in that it primarily indicates action that has occurred before the action (i.e., antecedent to) indicated by the main verb in the clause. However, the aorist participle can also indicate action that is simultaneous with, as well as subsequent to the action of the main verb. The first use of an aorist participle in this passage is in verse 3, “who has blessed” (ὁ εὐλογήσας—*EULOGESAS*), and it is antecedent to the action of the main verb, which in this instance is the adjective, “Blessed” (εὐλογητός—*EULOGETOS*). The emphasis being that we as believers declare God to be “Blessed” because He first “blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”

The second use of an aorist participle is in verse 5, “He predestined” (προορίσας—*PROORISAS*), and this usage here is key to the order of our salvation in Christ. It is used in relation to the main verb, “He chose” (ἐξελέξατο—*EXELEXATO*) in verse 4, and its usage here can either be antecedent to, or simultaneous with “He chose.” If it is viewed in an antecedent manner, it means that we who are believers “were preordained” to eternal life before “we were chosen” by the Lord.

On the other hand, if it is viewed as a simultaneous act, then the choosing and predestinating are one and the selfsame act in God’s economy. In either case, what is clearly being described is our salvation in Christ, not merely the blessings that attend our salvation as Mr. Hunt asserts. In addition, I see the verb “He chose” as a constative aorist, viewing the whole of our relationship with the Lord as one entity, from our being chosen in Christ “before the foundation of the world,” up to and through our going home to be with Him for all eternity.

The third use of an aorist participle is in verse 9, “He made known” (γνωρίσας—*GNORISAS*), and the main verb it is governed by is “He lavished” (ἐπερίσσευσεν—*EPERISSEUSEN*) in verse 8. Clearly, in this instance, the aorist participle is to be understood as simultaneous with the action of “He lavished.” That is, as “He lavished” upon us the “riches of His grace,” He in turn made and is making known to us “the mystery of His will” through His “wisdom and insight.” The verb “He lavished” is an aorist, active indicative, and I see this as a

constative aorist in the same way as “He chose” in verse 5 above. Consequently, this “lavishing” began when we accepted Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and continues throughout our life. Thus, here again, we are not simply talking about the blessings that follow our salvation, but we are talking about the very act of our coming into Christ through the re-birth and all that accompanies and follows that re-birth.

The fourth and final use of an aorist participle in this passage is in verse 11, “having been predestined” (προορισθέντες—*PROORISTHENTES*). The main verb with which it is aligned is “we have obtained an inheritance” (ἐκληρώθημεν—*EKLEROTHEMEN*), and it comes from the verb *KLEROO* (κληρώω), whose basic meaning is “to appoint by lot, or choose.” In this instance, the aorist participle, “having been predestined,” is antecedent to the action of this main verb, which is an aorist, passive indicative, and that means that someone other than ourselves “appointed or chose us.” And here too, I see “we have obtained an inheritance/we were appointed/we were chosen” as a constative aorist in the same way as the above examples of “He chose” in verse 4 and “He lavished” in verse 8.

However, what is most significant here in verse 11 is that the aorist, passive participle, “having been predestined,” is quite clearly antecedent to the action of “we have obtained an inheritance/we were appointed/we were chosen,” and that means that the predestinating occurred prior to our “obtaining an inheritance/being appointed/being chosen.” In addition, the verbs “He chose” in verse 4 and “we have obtained an inheritance/we were appointed/we were chosen” here in verse 11 are both in tandem with the aorist participle “predestined,” which comes from the Greek verb *PROORIDZO* (προορίζω).

In the first instance in verse 4, *PROORIDZO* is in the active voice, and thus the primary reason why it may be seen as either antecedent to or simultaneous with the action of the verb, “He chose.” On the other hand, in verse 11, *PROORIDZO* is in the passive voice, and syntactically the clear meaning of that is that the “predestinating” occurred before the “having obtained an inheritance/having been appointed/having been chosen.” That being the case, it would seem a bit strange to have the first example be simultaneous and the second obviously antecedent. Therefore, for consistency’s sake, it would seem that in both instances, the aorist participles are antecedent to the action of the main verbs, and that would mean that the predestinating of believers in Christ occurred prior to choosing those who would be believers.

Mr. Hunt also made reference to [I Peter 1:2](#), which in order to understand, needs to be read with verse 1:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure ([I Peter 1:1–2](#)).

The literal reading of the above passage is as follows:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the refugees of the dispersion throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia who are the elect, according to the foreknowledge and predetermination of God the Father by sanctification through the Spirit into obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ; may grace and peace be multiplied to you.

As has already been pointed out, the word for “foreknowledge” in Greek is *prognosis* (πρόγνωσις), and it means “foreknowledge, forethought, pre-arrangement & predetermination.” Therefore, when reading [I Peter 1:2](#), one needs to include both aspects of the meaning, “foreknowledge and predetermination,” in order to present as accurate as possible the thought being expressed. This brings into question once again, does “foreknowledge” mean God sees what man is going to do, and then makes his predetermination based on man’s actions, or does it simply mean God foreknows all things that are going to happen because He has prearranged events, while at the same time giving mankind the final step of choosing his direction? Based on our analysis of the previous sections, it would seem that the concept of “foreknowledge” leans more toward the latter than the former.

One other very important passage that ties in with [Ephesians 1:3–12](#) is [Romans 8:28–30](#):

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; 30 and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

The key area of discussion is in verse 29 where “foreknew” precedes “predestined.” As we have already discussed, the Greek word for “foreknew” comes from *PROGINOSKO* (προγινώσκω), and it means “to know beforehand or in advance, to choose beforehand,” and the Greek word for “predestined” comes from *PROORIDZO* (προορίζω), its basic meaning being “to decide upon beforehand, to appoint beforehand.” Therefore, we see that the meaning of “choose beforehand” is a legitimate and real meaning of the verb “foreknew” (*PROGINOSKO*—προγινώσκω), and not only that, but this corresponds to the order presented to us in [Ephesians 1:4–5 & 11](#) above.

In [Ephesians 1:4–5](#) we read: “just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, ...” We saw in verses 4 & 5 that “predestined” could either be antecedent or simultaneous with “chose.” In [Ephesians 1:11](#) we read: “also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose ...” We saw here, however, that “having been predestined” clearly is antecedent to “we have obtained an inheritance/we were appointed/we were chosen.” That being the case, God’s predestinating occurred before we were chosen, and this would obviously be true for verses 4–5 as well. What we have in [Romans 8:29](#) is the very same order: “For whom He foreknew and chose beforehand, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, ...”

Even more importantly, verse 30 makes it very clear that “predestination” has everything to do with salvation, as well as with our growth in Christ: “and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.” Calling and justification are certainly related to our salvation, and predestination precedes both of these works of God, which is all part of our salvation, as well as our growth in Him.

The last passage I want to look at is [Romans 9:6–13](#):

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; 7 neither are they all children because they are Abraham’s descendants, but: “through Isaac your descendants will be named.” 8 That is, it is not the

children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. 9 For this is a word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.” 10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; 11 for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, 12 it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.” 13 Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Concerning this portion of [Romans 9](#), Mr. Hunt says, “Paul is not at all dealing with the eternal destiny of Esau, Jacob and Pharaoh” (Hunt, 270), but rather “God is ultimately referring to nations within which not every individual is either saved or lost” (Hunt, 263–264). And again, “Nor does Paul, in the context of his quotation in Romans, even hint any more than does Malachi at the individual salvation of Esau, Jacob or Pharaoh” (Hunt, 262). It is very clear, therefore, that Mr. Hunt does not in any way see the above quoted passage in Romans as remotely referring to the salvation of anyone, but rather to two nations within the womb of Sarah, based on the scriptures Paul uses from Genesis and Malachi:

Since he is quoting Malachi and Genesis, it must follow that Paul likewise is not referring to the individuals named but to the nations descended from them. In fact, that the election and prophecy referred to nations rather than individuals was clear from the very start....

The prophecy was, however, perfectly fulfilled in the nations descended from Esau and Jacob. “Two nations” were unquestionably the subject of God’s declaration.... (Hunt, 263)

The question before us, therefore, is whether or not Mr. Hunt is correct in his assertion about Paul. If he is, then once again, this will be a major breakthrough in understanding one of the most difficult passages in Scripture. But let’s look at this passage and see what it is saying.

First of all, like [Ephesians 1:3–12](#), [Romans 9:6–13](#) has very clear language that certainly gives the distinct impression that Paul is discussing salvation. In [Romans 9:8](#), for example, Paul says: “That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.” That which Paul is talking about in this verse in its context is the same as [Galatians 4:21–31](#):

Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. 23 But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. 24 This is allegorically speaking: for these women are two covenants, one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. 25 Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. 27 For it is written, “Rejoice, barren woman who does not bear; Break forth and shout, you who are not in labor; For more are the children of the desolate Than of the one who has a husband.” 28 And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. 30 But what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with

the son of the free woman.” 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

If you take this passage in Galatians in its total context, you will see clearly that Paul is unequivocally talking about our salvation in Christ through faith, versus through the Law, or through the physical lineage of Abraham. Thus, Paul’s reference to the “children of the flesh” in [Romans 9:8](#) is the same as his reference to “the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh” in [Galatians 4:23](#), in that both are referring to those who think they are “children of God” because they are physical descendants of Abraham, as well as because they believe they are justifying themselves through keeping the Law.

The whole epistle to the Galatians may be wrapped up in [Galatians 3:11](#): “Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for ‘THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.’ ” Therefore, Paul’s reference to “the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise” in [Galatians 4:23](#) is a statement about our salvation by “grace through faith” (“the son by the free woman”), versus salvation by the works of the Law (“the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh”).

In addition, the statement in [Galatians 4:28](#), “And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise,” is clearly reiterating the truth that those who by faith have received Jesus and been born again by the Spirit are like Isaac, who was the child “of promise.” On the other hand, Ishmael, who was “born according to the flesh,” represents those who are trying to justify themselves through the Law. I honestly don’t know of any evangelical scholar, teacher or pastor who would deny this truth.

Secondly, with reference to the term “children of God” in New Testament terms, the evidence seems rather clear that it is a term used to describe the salvation of those who believe in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and, therefore, have become and are “children of God.” For example, in [John 1:11–13](#), we read: “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

The reference to “His own” is obviously referring to the Jews. But then John goes on, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to describe who the “children of God” are, “those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” How much clearer could John be, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in his delineation that “children of God” is a reference describing the salvation of those who believe in Jesus, are saved, and are now “children of God” through being “born ... of God”? I see no confusion, ambiguity or misunderstanding in John’s statement at all.

Another very important passage concerning “children of God” referring to salvation is found in [Romans 8:15–17](#):

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!” 16 The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.

This passage is so unambiguously clear about our salvation in Christ for those of us who have been born again, that the two terms found in this passage, “adoption as sons” and “children of God,” can’t possibly be misunderstood to be referring to anything else but our salvation. In

fact, we have the very same term, “adoption as sons” *HUIOTHESIAS* (υιοθεσία), in [Romans 8:15](#), as we have in [Ephesians 1:5](#), “adoption as sons” *HUIOTHESIAN* (υιοθεσίαν). There is no ambiguity at all that *HUIOTHESIAS* in [Romans 8:15](#) is referring to our salvation in Christ, and the exact same thing is true in [Ephesians 1:5](#). Likewise, just as “children of God” in [Romans 8:16](#) is clearly talking about our salvation in Christ, as also in [John 1:11–13](#), so too is “children of God” in [Romans 9:8](#) clearly and unambiguously referring to our salvation in Christ.

There are ten passages in the New Testament where the “children of God” are referred to, including [Romans 9:8](#), and, without any equivocation, they are all referring to a salvation relationship with God through the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. In addition, as [John 1:11–13](#) speaks with reference to individuals receiving Christ in order to become “children of God,” so too elsewhere, even though individuals may or may not be mentioned specifically, “children of God” as a group is made up of individuals who have received Christ and been born again.

Therefore, having looked at [Ephesians 1:3–12](#), [I Peter 1:1–2](#), [Romans 8:28–30](#) and [Romans 9:6–13](#), where predestination and election are used in a very clear and obvious connection with salvation, we see that, with all due respect to Mr. Hunt and his claim that such does not occur, the relationship between election and salvation is a clearly revealed biblical truth.

Mr. Hunt, however, in his very sincere desire to protect the body of Christ from what he sees as very damaging and unbiblical teaching on the subject of election and salvation from a Calvinistic perspective, makes a very interesting statement about this subject that is worthy of our attention:

The blessings that God has eternally purposed to bestow upon the redeemed have nothing to do with how they are saved but follow their salvation. And what blessings they are! We could have been given eternal life, and even a place in heaven like angels, without being made God’s children and joint heirs with Christ of all the inheritance He has in the Father. But God in His infinite love and grace predestined believers to be part of His family, His very own children who are called “unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus” ([I Peter 5:10](#)). As John Wesley said, “God decrees, from everlasting to everlasting, that all who believe in the Son of his love, shall be conformed to his image...” (Hunt, 233)

Ladies and gentlemen, such a statement as the above, is very misdirected, misguided and misleading. By Mr. Hunt saying that “We could have been given eternal life, and even a place in heaven like angels, without being made God’s children and joint heirs with Christ of all the inheritance He has in the Father,” is to completely redefine what salvation is. We have just finished going over the fact that to be saved, which is to have “eternal life,” is to be a “child of God” on an individual basis, and when grouped together, people who have “eternal life” and are saved are called “children of God.”

Now Mr. Hunt does go on to say, “But God in His infinite love and grace predestined believers to be part of His family, His very own children who are called ‘unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus’ ([I Peter 5:10](#)).” However, the very fact that he presents such a proposal to believers in order to substantiate his position that predestination and election are not at all connected with salvation, but are connected only with the blessings that follow one who has already been born again, is setting an incredibly dangerous precedent. I am sure he doesn’t see it that way, and I know this was not his intention, but the upshot of such a proposal opens the door to unbridled, theological propositions, whereby one can hope to substantiate anything he or she

chooses to put forth as “biblical teaching” by appending, “what if God ...” versus, “God has said ...” to any theological doctrine one might wish to promulgate.

Conclusion

As I shared in the beginning of this review, Mr. Hunt is driven by his agenda to destroy Calvinism, and in his drive to do so, he has unfortunately eschewed a number of biblical truths that Calvin himself embraced and emphasized, but which transcend Calvinism. As a result of that direction by Mr. Hunt, he has in turn fallen prey to the very things he accuses Luther and Calvin of doing.

For example, Mr. Hunt says, “It is disappointing that Luther so often forces Scripture to prove his point, instead of allowing it to speak for itself” (Hunt, 184). As we looked at the passages concerning Mr. Hunt’s approach toward man’s sinful nature in [Genesis 6:5](#) et al, as well as the passages in Romans and Ephesians concerning election and salvation, unfortunately, I believe we have seen some fairly clear examples of Mr. Hunt doing the same thing he accused Luther of doing.

Mr. Hunt makes reference to the vitriolic attacks Luther and Calvin aimed at their opponents, and without question they did:

One of the sad features of Calvin’s Institutes is the demeaning language he continually employs (much like Luther) to vilify all who disagree with him: ...

Beneath Calvin’s own bluster there is often little substance to his arguments, which in the end can be supported only by abusing Scripture (Hunt, 233–234).

After reading through every page of Mr. Hunt’s book, I must say that I see him equally as guilty of the same vitriol at times against his opponents as were Luther and Calvin against theirs. As I shared earlier, he is much more respectful to some than to others, but nonetheless his “demeaning language” that he continually employs against those whom he would consider his opponents is replete throughout his book. And although I would in no way describe Mr. Hunt’s arguments as “his own bluster” wherein “there is often little substance to his arguments,” which is the language he uses to describe Calvin’s writings, I would have to say that on numerous occasions (some of which I gave examples), he too is guilty of “abusing Scripture.”

There were a number of areas in his book that I did not broach in this review because I wanted to focus on those I felt were the most serious. Mr. Hunt does present some well thought out and reasonable arguments with regard to Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement and Irresistible Grace, but I didn’t feel his section on the Perseverance of the Saints was too well done as compared to the sections leading up to that.

In my opinion, his strongest and most biblically based argument is against the belief espoused by some Calvinists that regeneration precedes saving faith. This argument runs throughout his book, and he continues to return to it regardless of the particular section of Calvinism he is dealing with. It is an argument that those who hold to this particular, Calvinistic belief need to seriously consider and provide a thorough, biblically based response to.

On the other hand, I felt unequivocally that his weakest and least biblically based argument dealt with the sin nature of man and his handling of [Genesis 6:5](#) et al. In fact, his perspective concerning man’s sin nature permeates and affects all of his other perspectives in varying degrees. The second area where I felt he was very weak and lacked a solid, biblically based perspective was his argument against election in any way being related to salvation. Although I

wouldn't say his approach to this section lacks as much biblical credibility as does his handling of man's sin nature, I would have to say that he was certainly "twisting Scripture" concerning this subject matter in the same way he accuses Calvinists of doing in similar areas.

However, I believe the most profound weakness of his book is his unabashed bias against Calvinism. He has every right to reject Calvinism and all it stands for, but unfortunately, at times, his extreme bias seriously and adversely affects his presentation and evaluation of biblical and historical material. This is something that none of us are immune to, and we must be very careful to guard against it in order that our views do not become equally as clouded.

The one thing I feel more than anything else after reading Mr. Hunt's book is grief. Mr. Hunt expressed his grief at the end of his book over what he believes to be great distortions by Calvinism of the true picture of God, and how those distortions have turned so many away from Christ. My grief is over the picture given to the unbelieving world from his book of a not so disguised hatred, animosity and vitriol aimed at other believers, with whom he disagrees, in such a way that there is little difference between the animosities he expresses and the animosity of a like kind that the unbelieving world aims at its opponents.

Mr. Hunt repeatedly speaks of how God is libeled by Calvinism in that it "denies His love for all" (Hunt, 414), and I know, after reading his book, this is indeed a very sincere and driving passion for him. However, I must say that I did not see the love of God that he so passionately wants the world to know about channeled toward a number of those with whom he disagrees.

And finally, with all due respect to Mr. Hunt, I must say that this book is an example of how not to write a critique of fellow believers with whom we disagree. Rather than bringing about healing, restoration and unity in the Body of Christ, I see this book bringing even greater division, animosity and bitterness. Therefore, notwithstanding Mr. Hunt's passion for writing this book, I would not call this a great book with regard to the method and manner he dealt with Calvinism, let alone should it be considered the standard for an objective and critical evaluation of the history and teachings of Calvinism. The main reason I say this is that his deep hatred and loathing for Calvinism warped his objectivity so that his accuracy at times in handling Scripture and historical concerns was seriously marred.

May the Lord cause us to walk in grace and mercy toward those with whom we disagree in the Body of Christ, and may He continually bring us back to the following passage in our treatment and attitude toward one another before the world: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" ([John 13:34-35](#)).