

## **Doubt Is Not of Faith: The Presuppositional Approach to Doubt**

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.” John 14:1

“Fortiter in re; suaviter in modo.” Cornelius Van Til

Doubt has received a good deal of press in the past several decades, and for that I am grateful.<sup>1</sup> There is a need for more reflection on the nature and cause of doubt in the believer, as well as, how best to do battle against it. Historically, doubt has been treated under the division of practical or moral theology as a case of conscience or, when treated in systematics, under the topic of assurance of faith.<sup>2</sup> We do not typically view it as part of the task of apologetics to defend against the inroads of doubt. The target of apologetics, accordingly, is the unbeliever, not the believer with uncertainties. But apologetics is the defense of the faith, and doubt is an attack on faith. It is entirely sensible to employ the method of apologetics to help the believer who is struggling. And, in fact, that is what often happens in cases of doubt.

It should not be objectionable to use apologetics to combat the inroads of doubt. After all, as the Christian apologist, Cornelius Van Til, states, “In apologetics we have no well-delimited field of operation and no exclusive claim to any particular weapon. The net result, then, seems to be that in apologetics we have the whole field to cover.”<sup>3</sup> That whole field is, of course, the whole field of the theological disciplines. But an important question needs to be

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<sup>1</sup> See Alister McGrath, *Doubting: Growing Through the Uncertainties of Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2006); Os Guinness, *God in the Dark: The Assurance of Faith Beyond a Shadow of a Doubt* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1996); and John Ortberg, *Faith and Doubt* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> See Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 587-599; Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), 581-589

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics, Second Edition*, ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 22

asked, vis., what method of apologetics is the most beneficial? Doubt is a delicate issue, and one which must be handled properly. Thankfully, the Bible has much to say about doubt; moreover, it has given us a method of apologetics in which to do battle against unbelief. Further still, we have faithful expositors of that biblical method to give us guidance. It is the purpose of this paper to show that the biblical method of apologetics as expounded by Van Til and his followers is the best method of apologetics of doing battle against doubt.<sup>4</sup>

### **What is Doubt and Is It Neutral?**

Before we examine the biblical method of apologetics, it is necessary that we understand this thing we call “doubt.” To begin with, I want to make it clear that I am not talking about skepticism or agnosticism here. The doubt I will be talking about in this paper is the religious doubt that Christians face throughout their pilgrimage on earth. Alister McGrath has given several images of doubt from the Bible that I think are very helpful in understanding the nature of doubt.<sup>5</sup> I will list two of them. The first is *hesitation*. When Jesus appeared on the mountain to His disciples just before His ascension, we read that “when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted” (Matt. 28:17). The Greek word translated as “doubted” is *distazo*. This word has the sense of “to hold back” or “to hesitate.” When we doubt, we hesitate or hold back from placing complete trust in God and in His gospel.

The second image is indecision. James gives the following stark image of doubt: “He who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind” (James 1:6). The

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<sup>4</sup> The method developed by Cornelius Van Til is often called “Presuppositional Apologetics.” An excellent distillation of his thought is found in Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998). By “followers of Van Til” I mean especially Greg L. Bahnsen, John Frame, and K. Scott Oliphint. As much as I appreciate the insights of Francis Schaeffer and Gordon H. Clark, they are not as true to Van Til’s apologetic method as are the former.

<sup>5</sup> McGrath, *Doubting*, 49-53

Greek word used here is *diakrino*, which has the meaning of “to argue with yourself.” In the state of doubt, we are engaged in an internal debate with ourselves and are unable to come to any decision. This indecision leaves us like a ship without a harbor that is tossed about by the raging wind and sea.

These two images might give us the idea that being in doubt is like standing at a fork in the road and not having the confidence to proceed one way or another. It is tempting at this point to suppose that the doubting Christian is in a position of neutrality. And in fact, some do suggest that there is a sort of neutrality. Os Guinness, for example, writes, “If ours is an examined faith, we should be unafraid to doubt. If doubt is eventually justified, we were believing what clearly was not worth believing. But if doubt is answered, our faith grows stronger still.”<sup>6</sup> Doubt, for Guinness is not unbelief, but a “half-way stage” between belief and unbelief.<sup>7</sup> According to Guinness, then, we can stand as judge in our doubt and decide in a neutral way whether or not to believe or disbelieve.

The picture of doubt in Scripture, however, is not one of neutrality, but of unbelief and sin. Outright unbelief is described in Scripture as both irrational and immoral. The psalmist says, “The fool says in his heart there is no God” (Ps. 14:1). This well-known verse underscores the fundamental inanity of unbelief. The unbeliever will not admit to what is “plain to them” and “clearly perceived” (Rom. 1:19-20) in the world around them. They suppress the truth of God in their unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Their irrationality is further confirmed by their wicked and immoral lifestyle. The Psalmist says of the fool, “They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good” (Ps. 14:1).

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<sup>6</sup> Guinness, *God in the Dark*, pp. 14-15

<sup>7</sup> Guinness, *God in the Dark*, 27.

Doubt is also irrational. As was already noted above, James describes the one who doubts as one who is tossed about by wind and wave. The doubter is one who does not yet have a consistent and stable philosophy of life. Furthermore, inconsistency and instability in faith is linked to inconsistency and instability in morality. In Romans 14:23 Paul clearly states that sin is not absent from doubt: “But he who doubts (*diakrino*) is condemned, if he eats, because he does not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” The point to grasp here is the one John Calvin makes, “Paul means by this that when a work is undertaken with doubt it is faulty because the root of all good works is faith, by which we are sure they are acceptable to God.”<sup>8</sup>

Affirming Christians in their doubt by giving them a false hope of neutrality will not do. They must be confronted with the irrationality and immorality of their doubt. Whenever Jesus encountered doubters, he rebuked them for having weak faith. “O man of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matt. 14:31) This is not a rebuke for someone in a neutral halfway stage. Jesus rebuked Peter for having a weak faith when his faith ought to have been firm and sure. One wonders if James had Peter in mind when he wrote that doubters are like those tossed about by wind and wave. But notice, Jesus rebuked Peter after He saved him. Jesus does not excuse weak faith, yet weak faith does not disqualify one from being saved by Christ. Jesus came to save us from our sins, including our doubt.

This point needs to be understood, for when we speak of a Christian who doubts, we must be careful not to make him an outright unbeliever beyond the hope of salvation. Christ did not rebuke the weak in faith the same way he rebuked the Scribes and the Pharisees. His rebuke to

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<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 Vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), IV.xiii.20

the weak in faith was redemptive in nature. It was meant to expose their weakness and urge them to greater faith in Him. Christ is the exemplar par excellence of Van Til's motto, "fortiter in re; suaviter in modo."

### **Doubt and the Self-Attesting Christ of Scripture**

It would be nice if the moment we become believers, we are instantaneously transported into glory to the *visio beatifica*, but this is not the *via viatorum*. Instead, the Christian, like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, must face a host of challenges before entering the Celestial City. Indeed, it is Apostolic teaching that "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The tribulations we face are many and variegated. Some come from outside ourselves afflicting the body, and some are internal afflicting the soul. Doubt is a tribulation of the latter sort, and, for many Christians, it is through dark days of doubt that they must enter the kingdom of God.

It is important never to lose sight of this great fact that suffering is the way of the pilgrim. We are not greater than our Master, Jesus Christ, who bore the ultimate suffering on the cross, so that we might be redeemed by His blood. No cry of ours can ever match His in depth of agony when He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Christ knew that His disciples would suffer in this life. That is why He said to them before he was crucified, "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Van Til began his essay, "My Credo," with these words, "The self-attesting Christ of Scripture has always been my starting-point for everything I have said."<sup>9</sup> The doubting Christian,

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<sup>9</sup> Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo" in E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1971), 3.

too, must begin with the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. Paul wanted the Christians at Colossae to be “rooted and built up” in Christ, which was for the establishing of their faith (Col. 2:7). This was not just for the first few moments of their Christian life, so that they could then branch out into other philosophies. Rather, they were to remain rooted and built up in Christ at every moment of their Christian existence. “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him” (2:6).

In Christ, we are told, “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). All knowledge, indeed, all that exists, must be referenced in Christ. In Him everything is to be interpreted. The believer did not begin his Christian life by being rooted and built up in anything that had no reference to Christ. He did not begin his pilgrimage by neutrally examining the facts of the world and coming to the conclusion that Christ is, indeed, the Savior of the world. Rather, Christ came to him in Spirit and in power, through the preaching of the Word. His thoughts were no longer futile, and his mind was no longer senseless (Rom. 1:21). Instead, his mind became captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). It is worth noting that before Peter enjoined his readers to “always be prepared to make a defense” of the gospel, he called them to “reverence Christ as Lord” in their hearts (1 Pet. 3:15).

When, therefore, the believer is faced with doubt, the solution is not to take a step back into neutrality and assess the facts of the world around him in order to either justify his doubt or strengthen his faith. Neutrality is not an option. As an unbeliever, his thinking was futile. As a believer, it is captive to Christ. Where, then, is the neutrality? It is non-existent. Bahnsen explains, “One must be presuppositionally committed to Christ in the world of thought (rather than neutral) and firmly tied down to the faith which he has been taught, or else the persuasive

argumentation of secular thought will delude him.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Let the Word of Christ Dwell in You**

The self-attesting Christ is made known through His Word, and united to the believer by the means of the Holy Spirit. It is through the means of the Word and Spirit, that faith is created in a believer. His faith is also kept alive by the means of the Word and Spirit. Paul called the Colossians to “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom” (Col. 3:15-16). We can make a direct connection here between the peace of Christ and the word of Christ. The “philosophy and empty deceit,” which Paul denounced a chapter before (Col. 2:8), cannot bring peace of any kind but rather sows discord within the body of Christ, for it breeds endless disputations and speculations. And it sows discord within the hearts of believers, for it cannot lead to surety of faith and constancy of hope. The philosophy of the world may be “according to human tradition” and the “elemental spirits of the universe,” but it is not “according to Christ.” The peace of Christ can only rule in our hearts when we let the word of Christ dwell in us richly.

I can imagine how tempting it might be, in cases of doubt, to concede to Warfield that “faith is...necessarily grounded in evidences,”<sup>11</sup> that is, rational arguments for the truth of Christianity. After all, Warfield’s appeal to “right reason” works well with the doubting Christian, who has a regenerated mind. It is important, however, to keep in mind, that, though evidences have their place and benefit (not even Van Til would argue that we must dispense with

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<sup>10</sup> Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. 2, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973), 99.

evidences), they are not the ground of belief. Bahnsen writes,

Factual argumentation may become necessary, but it is never sufficient. What one takes to be factual, as well as the *interpretation* of accepted facts, will be *governed* by his underlying *philosophy of fact*--that is, by more basic, all-pervasive, value-oriented, categorizing, possibility-determining, probability-rating, supra-experiential, religiously-motivated *presuppositions*. It is at this presuppositional level that the crucial work in defending the faith must thus be done.<sup>12</sup>

We can hear the objection, “But doesn’t the believer have the correct presuppositions? We can, therefore, ground his faith in the face of doubt by examining the evidences for the truth of Christianity.” Again, we have no problem, *per se*, with evidences; they are helpful in support of the truth claims of Christianity. The problem lies, however, with the claim that evidences are the ground of faith. Saying this has the following effects: 1) it grants intellectual self-sufficiency to man, who does not have any self-sufficiency, and 2) it makes him the final arbiter of truth.

Regarding the first effect, man, whether believer or unbeliever, cannot claim any self-sufficiency, intellectual or otherwise. He is a created being, and at every point of his existence must admit that in God he lives and moves and has his being (Act 17:28). God gave him “life and breath and everything,” as well as, determined the “periods and boundaries” of his habitation (Acts 17:25-26). At no point can he say, “I am intellectually or physically self-sufficient.” When a man reasons, he reasons with the mind God gave him. When he denies the facts of the existence of God, he denies the facts that God placed before his very eyes.

Not even the believer can claim self-sufficiency. Paul was more than happy to admit that his “sufficiency is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5). The believer cannot claim that he has the intellectual self-sufficiency to ground his faith in evidences. He must renounce any autonomy in the matter

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<sup>12</sup> Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, p. 71



of faith, for his faith was not given to him by persuasive arguments but by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:4). No man can claim that his faith rests in his own strength or in the power of any man; rather, his faith rests in the power of God alone (1 Cor. 2:5).

The believer, too, must always realize that, no matter the cause of his doubt, back of it all is the God who has “ordained whatsoever comes to pass” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q/A 6). His doubt ultimately came about because God willed for it to happen, yet without being directly culpable for the evil that accompanies doubt. He who has redeemed His people has seen fit to hide His face from them at times. Our sufferings in this life are not a result of chance, but of God who uses all things for our good and our salvation.

Concerning the second effect, man, even in his best moments, cannot be the final arbiter of truth. Truth transcends man; it transcends even the world in which he is placed. Moreover, truth is not something impersonal, but deeply personal. God is not only true, but He is truth itself; He is *sovereignly* true. He has revealed to us the truth of Himself in His Word and in His Son, Jesus Christ. “And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, to know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). Christ bore witness to the truth of God’s Word. “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). And Christ, who is the very image of the invisible God, is also truth itself. When Pilate asked, “What is truth?” he did not realize that Christ had already answered this question the night before, when He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Man is not in a position to judge what is true or not. God alone is judge, and man must submit himself to the truth that God has revealed to him. We must keep in mind that it was when

man placed himself as judge of truth that he fell into sin. When Satan came to our first parents, he came to place doubt in their minds concerning the truth of God and his Word. Moreover, Satan wanted our first parents to set themselves up as judge over God in order to generate pride in their hearts. It was in this way that the kingdom of Satan gained a foothold in their hearts. The believer who doubts cannot be the final arbiter of truth. His very doubt is, in effect, an attempt to place himself as judge over God. Doubt, like Satan to Eve, says to the believer, “Did God really say?”

The foundation for faith cannot be anything other than God and His Word. Bahnsen writes, “It should be clear that this is the perspective of Scripture. It is God’s word which must be our ultimate and indisputable presupposition in thought and argumentation, rather than independently supported ‘brute facts.’”<sup>13</sup> The believer must let the word of Christ dwell in him richly, for it is only in this way that the peace of Christ can rule in his heart.

### **Our Faith in the Transcendent God**

This naturally leads us into the discussion of what Van Til called “the transcendental argument.” “A truly transcendental argument,” he explains, “takes any fact of experience which it wishes to investigate, and tries to determine what the presuppositions of such a fact must be, in order to make it what it is.”<sup>14</sup> A transcendental argument is distinguished from an inductive or deductive argument. An inductive argument reasons from cause and effect and reasons that God is the ultimate cause of every effect; whereas a deductive argument begins with a fact and tries to determine its cause, and from there seeks the ultimate cause. In both cases, the argument begins with man and tries to end with God. But in every case where man tries to argue from man to

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<sup>13</sup> Bahnsen, *Always Ready*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetics*, 516.

God, the arguments have met some pretty devastating counter-arguments. For example, it has been shown by Kant that “we cannot take for granted that the *a priori* concepts and principles of the reason can be used to transcend experience; that is, to know realities which are not given in experience.”<sup>15</sup> We might be surprised to find out that Scripture agrees with Kant at this point.

Zophar the Na’amathite, in a moment of unusual brilliance, asks rhetorically, “Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?” (Job 11:7) Agur son of Jakeh, similarly asks, “Who has ascended to heaven and come down?” (Prov. 30:4) The Scripture is quite clear that our method of apologetics must begin with the self-attesting God, who has revealed Himself in the self-attesting Christ of the self-attesting Scriptures. “It is the firm conviction,” argues Van Til, “of every epistemologically self-conscious Christian that no human being can utter a single syllable, whether in negation or in affirmation, unless it were for God’s existence. Thus the transcendental argument seeks to discover what sort of foundations the house of human knowledge must have.”<sup>16</sup> The transcendence of God does not allow us to work our way up to Him. Our method of apologetics needs to reflect this. We need to begin with the fundamental truth of the God Who is and Who has spoken.

The objection that this is circular reasoning is met by pointing out that in reality all reasoning is circular. Van Til says, “To admit one’s own presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, *circular reasoning*. The starting point, method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another.”<sup>17</sup> The Christian must begin with God and end with God. But this does not imply a logical fallacy; rather, it shows that unbelief

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<sup>15</sup> Frederick Copelston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 6, Part II, (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1964), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 517.

<sup>17</sup> Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 130.

acts in the same manner except that it begins with man and ends with man. The unbeliever is unable to draw any conclusions about a being that is totally transcendent from himself; unless he is able to ascend, as it were, to the heavens and come back again.

Christians admit that they are not able to ascend to heaven, but there is One who has come down from heaven, and He has declared to us the Father. Jesus Christ has come from heaven, and has gone to heaven. His Word, which has sanctified us, declares to us what Christ Himself taught concerning the Father. Moreover, the Spirit has also come down from heaven and has witnessed with our spirits that Christ's words are, indeed, true. This is the very foundation of everything we know concerning God and his works. If we did not begin with God and His Word in our apologetics, we would be untrue to the One who redeemed us.

It is necessary, therefore, that the doubting believer cease from any attempt to work his way up to God by any inductive or deductive line or reasoning. God has descended to him in His Son, Jesus Christ, who dwells in him by His Spirit. It is because of this indwelling of the Spirit that he can cry, "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6). Only in this can he find peace and rest for his weary, doubting soul.

## **Conclusion**

Van Til concluded his pamphlet, "Why I Believe in God," with these words, "Well, my meanderings have, to be sure, been circular; they have made everything turn on God. So now I shall leave you with Him, and with His mercy."<sup>18</sup> Doubt is not of faith; the Christian who is in the grip of doubt is not in some neutral safe-house. He is not in a position to objectively observe the facts around him in order to make a rational decision one way or the other. His only recourse

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<sup>18</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God* (Phillipsburg, NJ, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., n.d.), 20

is to let his thoughts turn upon God, who shows mercy. The method of presuppositional apologetics is such that it brings you face to face with the reality of the ugliness of doubt, but quickly shows you that there is every reason to hope in the mercy and grace of God.

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