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Navigating the Apologetic Method Debate**

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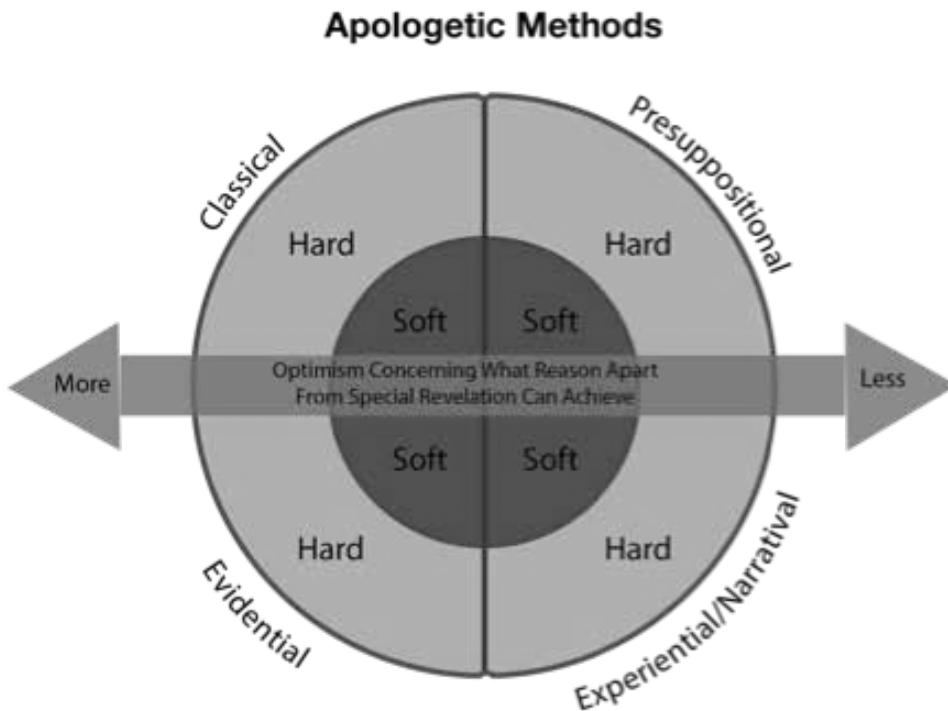


A Way Forward for Pastor-Apologetists: Navigating the Apologetic Method Debate

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Introduction

When discussing apologetics with pastors, I routinely hear two types of responses concerning method: frustration and confusion.¹ While often having been taught a particular approach that seems logical and fits within their theological tradition, they nevertheless find the approach is too confining. “Real life discussions do not work like that,” they tell me. The systems they learned in seminary classes made sense but in the messiness of ministry they often fall short. Dealing with people who don’t

1. Adapted from *Apologetics at the Cross* by Josh D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen. Copyright © 2018 by Josh D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen. Used by permission of Zondervan. www.zondervan.com.

primarily theorize their way through life or who seem to have completely different operational frameworks, they become either frustrated with their neighbors or dissatisfied with apologetics as they understand it (and often both). Others are simply confused by the various methods, and when they try to delve into the methodological discussions they find some of the disputes akin to theological hair splitting and the polarizing tone uninviting.²

In hopes of alleviating some of this confusion and frustration, this article will summarize four apologetic approaches and discuss their potential strengths and weaknesses. As you consider the opening chart, keep in mind that the views of some apologists will not fit neatly in the center of one of the four major quadrants.³ For example, some views might sit in one quadrant while gravitating towards another, and one might even lie on the line between two quadrants. The *soft* versions of each approach are a reminder that these four methods are not necessarily sealed off from each other. The vertical axis divides the chart along a spectrum according to how optimistic each approach is towards the usefulness of natural revelation apart from special revelation.

Two Evidence-Based Approaches

The category of *evidence-based apologetics* encompasses both approaches represented on the left side of the graphic: classical and evidential apologetics. Due to their similarities, I will consider the two side-by-side.

Classical Apologetics (or The Two-Step Approach)

Classical apologetics uses what is often referred to as a “two-step approach,” which argues first for theism in general and then for Christianity as the most reasonable form of theism. The logic behind this approach is that a person must initially take the first step and accept the likelihood of a deity before they can accept that a specific God—the Christian God—exists. If a person has an assumed framework of naturalism and does not allow for the possibility of the supernatural, then they will often quickly dismiss core Christian claims. The first step (arguing for *a god*), therefore, makes room for the second step (arguing for *the Christian God*).

2. In recent years, more apologists have been charitably listening to alternative strategies, finding strengths in other approaches, and even acknowledging possible weaknesses in their own apologetic traditions. See for instance, David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person-Centered Approach to Christian Defense* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 103, who points out how the various methods each have both valid points and blind spots that should be observed.

3. The apologetic taxonomy in this short article, like other attempts to summarize apologetic camps, cannot be exhaustive. For examples of other ways to divide up the apologetic approaches, see Brian K. Morley, *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Approaches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015) and Steven B. Cowan ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

Classical apologists, compared to the approaches that are represented on the right side of the graphic, tend to display a higher degree of confidence in what human reason can accomplish apart from special revelation. They assert that reason and evidence can be used to establish theism and the historical claims of Christianity. Natural revelation apart from special revelation can demonstrate the high probability of realities such as God's existence, Jesus' crucifixion, and even Jesus' resurrection from the dead. However, most would still assert that special revelation is necessary for conversion.

Potential Strengths of Classical Apologetics

First, classical apologetics emphasizes the Bible's endorsement of using evidence and logic to persuade. Classical apologists do not shy away from the Bible's command that Christians be prepared to give reasons for the hope that they have, nor do they avoid the various instances in Scripture where logic and evidence are used to persuade.⁴

Second, classical apologetics has promoted the development of serious scientific, philosophical, and historical evidence for Christianity. In other words, classical apologists, rather than simply saying that Christians *can* use these types of arguments, emphatically assert that Christians *should* use and develop them. For this reason, classical apologetics has produced some of the most rigorous arguments for Christianity. Also, in the two-step approach they use to develop these arguments, classical apologists have rightly emphasized and shown the importance of integrating multiple disciplines in apologetics—specifically science, philosophy, and history.

Evidentialist Apologetics (or The One-Step Approach)

Evidentialism, also known as the “single-step approach,” is similar to the classical approach in that it has a higher degree of confidence in human reason unaided by special revelation than the views on the left side of our graphic. However, unlike the classical apologist, the evidentialist does not believe that the first step in the two-step method—arguing for a general theism—is *necessary* in making a case for Christianity. Instead, evidentialists will start their apologetic by focusing on a historical case for either one of or a combination of the following: the general reliability of the Bible, the identity of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus. Evidentialists argue that this approach is simpler in that it takes others straight to the central components of Christianity: the life of Jesus, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. In short, the evidentialist apologist believes that appeals to the traditional proofs for theism are unnecessary because historical evidence alone is strong enough to convince even those who deny theism.

4. E.g., Ps. 19:1; Lk 1:1–4; John 20:30–31; Acts 1:1–3, 26:26; Rom. 1:19–20; 1 Cor. 15:6.

Potential Strengths of Evidential Apologetics

First, evidential apologetics quickly takes others to the evidence for the historical elements of the gospel: Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. This fits well with the Bible's willingness to point to evidence and the way it emphasizes the centrality of the gospel (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:1–8). As some evidentialists point out, the first step in the classical model can often lead to entanglement in long debates over complicated issues of science and philosophy, whereas the evidentialist model gets straight to the point: Jesus.

Second, evidential apologetics has promoted rigorous historical argumentation for Christianity. Christianity has a unique historic flavor to it. Unlike the gods of other religions, the Christian God did not just send a messenger to speak his revelation into human history; he himself entered into human history as the revelation. Thus, the heart of the Christian claim is, among other religions, uniquely historical. The best of evidential apologetics has stayed attuned to the latest historical scholarship and archeology in order to not only answer the questions of skeptics but also to make a case for the historical reliability of the Bible and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Potential Weaknesses of Evidence-Based Approaches

In pointing out the weaknesses of each apologetic tradition, I am not suggesting that everyone necessarily falls prey to these critiques—note the word *potential* in the heading above. There are, however, some concerns commonly expressed that appear to be a danger for each apologetic tradition. Usually such concerns are most applicable to those who have isolated themselves from the critiques and insights of other apologetic approaches. Keep in mind that in this particular section I will, because of their similarities, consider the dangers of classical and evidentialist apologetics together under the heading of *evidence-based approaches*.

The first danger of evidence-based approaches is that they can view humans as primarily thinking beings and singularly focus on persuasion that appeals cerebrally. This can happen either in the formal articulation of their methodology or, more likely, in its practical application. The danger is that the evidence-based apologist may treat people like “cognitive machines, defined above all, by thought and rational operations”⁵ and therefore see his job primarily as pouring the right information “into” a non-Christian and getting the wrong information “out” so that they will assent to the propositions of Christianity. While most would not present this so crudely in theory, it is nevertheless a real danger in practice. Those within evidence-based traditions are vulnerable to falling into the trap of just “reasoning

5. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 42.

logically from the facts” without mastering the ability to appeal to people as believing and desiring beings.

Moreover, the Christian faith is much more than just an acceptance of facts about God. The call of Christ is not to develop enough mental ability or academic rigor to figure out the pathway to truth. Rather, Christianity involves many different dimensions existing beyond a mere mental assent to facts, such as stepping out in faith, receiving grace, submitting to Jesus, accepting mystery, and partaking in the love of God. However, we must not construct straw men: many evidence-based apologists would agree with the statements the previous paragraph makes about Christianity. Still, because of their emphasis on reason, the danger remains that in practice, evidence-based apologists may unintentionally make Christianity sound more like the answer to a math problem than a passionate call of a loving husband to his lost bride.

Second, evidence-based approaches can lack an appreciation for human situatedness. Sometimes evidence-based apologists will make it sound as if they are simply using common sense and reason recognized by all: “The truth is really obvious, so why can’t everyone see it?” The problem is that with the advent of modern pluralism and the sociology of knowledge, it becomes clear that there are plenty of very intelligent people who do not see the truth Christians do as “really obvious.” In his important work on the development of doctrine, Alister McGrath makes this point when he writes that if apologetics is understood “as an attempt to justify the ‘rationality’ or ‘reasonableness’ of Christian beliefs *on the basis of the notion of universally valid patterns* of reason and thought,” then the apologetic enterprise is in trouble.⁶

McGrath is not arguing for relativism, which can be dismissed as self-refuting. Nor is McGrath saying that there are no points of contact between believers and those outside of the Christian community. At play here is an important distinction between, on the one hand, what we might call *basic logic*—which in some sense is universal and is used, for example, in mathematics and entailed in the law of non-contradiction—and, on the other hand, the *larger frameworks of rationality and self-evident truths* held to by certain cultures and groups in history.⁷ For instance, it seems self-evident to many westerners that all humans are worthy of respect and dignity. Certainly, Christianity has taught this and has left its mark on western culture to such an extent that it might seem like common sense. However, belief in the dignity and worth of all human beings is far from a universal norm embraced by all cultures in

6. Alister McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundations of Doctrinal Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 199 (emphasis mine).

7. *Ibid.*, 90.

history.⁸ Thus, as the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has stressed, when we are speaking about these broader claims of justice or practical rationality—even those seemingly “obvious” to us—we must ask, “Whose justice and which rationality are we talking about?”⁹ As Christians we affirm there is a true rationality rooted in God and his gospel, but we should recognize that others assume different competing frameworks for rationality.

If you find yourself preferring the evidence-based apologetic approaches or are already working within classical or evidential apologetics, you ought to be aware of and avoid the “it’s just obvious” mentality. For while your interpretation of the evidence might seem obvious to you, those who have not assumed a Christian framework—or at least a framework that has significant overlap to it—will often not see it as “common sense.”

Third, ultimately Scripture should assess what makes for a “good” argument. In determining the rules for a sound apologetic argument, some are pushing Scripture aside in favor of autonomous human reason. This critique pointedly asks: “Who determines what the ultimate standard is for what is true and false? How do we judge between competing systems of rationality? Can we line up more proofs and evidence to support our proofs and evidence?”

In addition to using reason as evidence-based methods stress, *Christian* apologists should acknowledge that God’s Word has the final say in what makes for a “good” argument. This does not mean that Christians have no connecting points with the unbeliever or that the logic and morality of Scripture will *always* seem strange to outsiders. However, at times the Bible’s logic and ethic will seem at odds with the world around us. A divine being suffering as a human will seem foolish to many, and in fact, some critics, horrified, have remarked, “[that] sounds like divine child abuse.”

8. See Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 311–61; Charles Taylor, *Sources of Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 515–18. John Gray, from a secular perspective argues that “cast off Christian hopes” ground much of western morality: “We inherit our belief—or pretence that moral values take precedence over all other valuable things from a variety of sources, but chiefly from Christianity.” *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2002), 88.

9. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 399. MacIntyre is not denying there are some basic laws of logic (such as the law of non-contradiction) that are universal. Also, see McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine*, 90. Lest they be misunderstood, neither MacIntyre or McGrath are arguing for forms of fideism or blind faith against logic. For MacIntyre, the way forward is asking which truth claims within a particular tradition offers the most “explanatory power” as the last line in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* points out, “The rival claims to truth of contending traditions of enquiry depend for their vindication upon the adequacy and the explanatory power of the histories which the resources of each of those traditions in conflict enable their adherents to write” (403). See Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), for his take on how this should be developed in the field of apologetics. Also see Lesslie Newbigin’s, chapter entitled, “Reason, Revelation, and Experience” in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 52–65 and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), xii–xiv.

The Apostle Paul reminds us that responses like this should not surprise us: “Christ crucified [is] a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). As Christians, we must be careful to allow God’s word set the parameters for defining a “good” argument, rather than allowing shifting cultural frameworks to decide (1 Cor. 1:25).

Consider another example: an evidence-based apologist might appeal to the “current historical methods” as a supposed neutral arbiter of questions such as “Who was Jesus really?” and “Did Jesus really rise again?” However, such an apologist would be missing an important question: what are these “current historical methods” and who has defined them? Historical methods can assume norms that work against the framework of Christianity. Furthermore, no method works independently of the persons applying it. That is why, for instance, twenty-first century western historians have produced such different portraits of Jesus.¹⁰ Therefore, when referring to the “rules of history” it is important not to imply that either “the current historical methodology” or the historians themselves can operate as a neutral determiner of truth. Nor do historical events interpret themselves. Special revelation is needed to tell us what historical events ultimately mean. However, we need to be balanced.

Christian apologetics will at times rightly and productively employ what can be called *thin reasoning*, playing by some of the rules of the current historical methodology. One can appeal to human intuitions or a shared understanding of the “good” or “rational” without supplanting the Word of God as the final authority. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that it is not as though the methodology of any discipline, including history, has dropped down from the sky in perfect form so that it can be appealed to uncritically as a neutral arbiter of truth. At times, we should use *thick reasoning* and be willing to pull the rug out from underneath the very assumptions made by any given secular methodology.

10. The result of the various Quests for the historical Jesus has not been a single historical Jesus but instead a variety of competing portraits of the historical Jesus, which are too many to list here. Dale Allison, who has made a career in writing extensively in the field of Jesus research, is an example of a growing trend among scholars to question historical Jesus research as it has traditionally been conducted. After noting some of the variety of the portraits of Jesus that are clearly “not complementary but contradictory,” he points out that the Quests have only achieved agreement on minimal and basic information about Jesus. He goes on to provide examples of how past scholarly opinions, which were at one time accepted basically as facts among critical scholars, are now out of favor and are viewed as misguided relics of the past.” He then adds, “This is one reason why I am allergic to the phrase ‘assured critical result.’” *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 10–11. For similar sentiments see Scot McKnight, “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” *Christianity Today* 54, no. 4 (April 2010): 26; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996); Jonathan T. Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), also names Richard Bauckham, Markus Bockmuehl, Richard Hays, and Francis Watson as internationally respected scholars who “question historical Jesus studies as they have been practiced” (93). My point here is not that historical research is unimportant. Rather, the point is that scholars themselves disagree on historical methodology, so appealing to this methodology uncritically as a kind of neutral arbitrator for determining the “facts” fails to do justice to the scholarly conversations that are actually occurring.

Soft versus Hard Classical Apologetics

Some apologists, which I refer to as **hard classical apologists**, insist that a logical argument for theism *must* precede a historical argument for the reliability of the Bible or the resurrection. In their view, a non-Christian person will not even consider evidence for the supernatural events of Scripture unless they first adopt theism.

However, some well-known classical apologists, such as William Lane Craig, seem open to other approaches and could therefore be called **soft classical apologists**. Craig is well known for using the kalam cosmological argument in support of God's existence and then preceding by arguing that Jesus' bodily resurrection offers the best account of the historical evidence. In this way, Craig clearly fits into the standard classical model. However, he also emphasizes the need for various other types of arguments:

Of course, showing Christianity to be true will involve much more than the two arguments above: they are but two links in the coat of mail, and the positive case will need to be accompanied by a defensive case against objections. *The apologetic task, then, is perhaps best seen as a collective project taken on by the believing community.*¹¹

Craig also has expressed the merit of using historical evidence prior to moving on to the second step of the classical apologetics approach. For example, he writes, "I certainly agree that an argument from miracles can be part of a cumulative case for theism."¹² At another point, considering the evidence for the resurrection, Craig writes that the historian "may indeed rightly infer from the evidence that God has acted here in history."¹³ So it seems that for Craig, the first step in the two-step classical argument is ideal, but it might not be absolutely necessary.¹⁴

Craig serves as an example of a leading apologist who prefers the two-step classical method, yet also shows openness by not strictly drawing a line between which types of arguments are allowed in each stage of the two-step approach.

Soft versus Hard Evidential Apologetics

In its ideal form, **hard evidentialist apologetics** would only need to include historical evidences for Jesus, the resurrection, and the Bible, and it would never appeal to philosophy or science to make a case for a theistic worldview in preparation for its historical case for Christianity. While there are some New Testament scholars

11. William Lane Craig, "Classical Apologetics," in Cowan, 53. (Emphasis mine).

12. William Lane Craig, "A Classical Apologist's Response" in Cowan, 122–23.

13. William Lane Craig, *Assessing the New Testament Evidence for the Historicity of the Resurrection of Jesus* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989), 419.

14. This is what the evidentialist apologist Gary Habermas has argued, who writes that since Craig allows historical evidence as one of the indications for theism, "while the initial step [in the two-step approach] may be helpful, it is not mandatory." "An Evidentialist's Response," in Cowan, 60.

who seem unconcerned with other types of arguments, the hard version of evidential apologetics is rarely adopted formally. Instead, most evidential apologists tend to be **soft evidentialists**, and only say that while the classical arguments for theism can be helpful, they are not *necessary*. In other words, most evidentialists believe that the historical arguments contain enough firepower to make the case for theism and Christianity without having to turn to the first step in classical apologetics. Gary Habermas explains, “Typical arguments for God’s existence are frequently utilized [by evidentialists], but unlike classical apologists, not because they are necessary. Further, evidentialists often begin their discussions of evidence with these theistic arguments.”¹⁵ Thus, the soft form of evidentialism is not so much a “distinct apologetic methodology” which is never willing to use the classical two-step method than it is “a personally preferred style of argumentation.”¹⁶

Presuppositional Apologetics

Found on the right side of the opening summarizing chart, presuppositionalists are less optimistic, if not altogether negative, about what reason apart from special revelation can achieve. Presuppositionalism, as its name suggests, asserts that reasoning does not take place in a vacuum; rather, a person’s reasoning is colored by their presuppositions or assumptions—the lenses through which they see the world. And because non-Christians deny the true God that they know exists, they reason with unbelieving and sinful presuppositions.

Cornelius Van Til, the father of presuppositionalism, argued that we can know with certainty that the Christian God exists because we must presuppose him to be rational. Thus, for many presuppositionalists, probabilistic or “best explanation” arguments are off-limits because such arguments do not do justice to the power of the Christian case and would give unbelievers an excuse for their unbelief. According to Van Til, apologists who appeal to human reason actually inflame human sinfulness. He argued that traditional apologetics reinforces human autonomy and makes unbelievers the judge of God, when instead, as presuppositionalists assert, unbelievers should submit to God as judge. The unbeliever’s problem is not knowledge; it is submission.¹⁷

This raises an obvious question: Should Christians just proclaim the gospel and forego apologetics? What is an apologist to do? The presuppositionalist, taking seriously both the corruption of human reasoning and the inability of the unregenerate to comprehend spiritual realities, sets out to undermine the very framework of non-Christian thinking. The presuppositionalist asserts that the authority of the Bible should

15. Ibid., 60–61.

16. These are William Lane Craig’s words. “A Classical Apologist’s Response,” in Cowan, 122.

17. Brian Morley, *Mapping Apologetics: Comparing Contemporary Approaches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 72.

be the assumed starting point in apologetic discourse. As Van Til himself said, “The only ‘proof’ of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of ‘proving’ anything.”¹⁸ Thus, the goal of this apologetic approach is to undermine a non-Christian’s worldview by demonstrating that without the Christian God they cannot consistently claim meaning, truth, or logic—and that to the extent that they *do* use such things, they are only “borrowing capital” from Christianity. This method is referred to as the *transcendental argument*. By questioning an unbeliever’s presuppositions and requiring them to justify their rationality, the apologist reduces their position to absurdity. Once the unbeliever realizes that their current worldview cannot provide sufficient justification, Christianity is then articulated as the only option that makes rational sense of the world.

Potential Strengths of Presuppositional Apologetics

Presuppositional apologetics helpfully emphasizes...

- *the importance of Scripture*
- *that non-Christians assume presuppositions which negatively impact their reasoning ability*
- *that sin damages the whole person*

Presuppositionalism offers an important reminder that the Word of God, rather than particular and local cultural frameworks of the day, should be the undergirding framework through which Christians view reality—charting a vision for what is good, rational, and meaningful. Scripture should be the “norming norm.” Moreover, moral issues cannot be neatly separated from rational issues. Humans are not neutral agents out to discover God unimpeded; rather, they are sinful beings who are limited because they suppress the knowledge of God (Rom. 1:18–32).

Potential Weaknesses of Presuppositional Approaches

First, most apologists do not find that the transcendental argument alone has the ability to demonstrate the truthfulness of Christianity. It seems too much to ask one argument to prove the existence of all the attributes of the Christian God. While Christianity provides a lens that makes sense of the world and our cognitive abilities, other worldviews are able to offer intelligible accounts, even though they explain less. Moreover, according to their own contrasting framework of rationality, many will find certain Christian doctrines themselves irrational (e.g., the full deity and full humanity of Christ existing as one person or the doctrine of the Trinity), so the claim that their non-Christian view is irrational could easily be turned back

18. Cornelius Van Til, “My Credo,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1971), 21.

on the apologist. Thus, a variety of different kinds of arguments would be needed in support.

Second, presuppositionalists have lacked the ability to effectively transfer their methodology and arguments to a broad audience. Often their arguments have not been articulated in user-friendly ways, and they have lacked needed specifics.¹⁹ It is one thing for philosophers to argue about how to ground rationality, but it is another thing when faced with a skeptic who is raising issues about the Bible's reliability, someone who is struggling to believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection, or a Muslim asserting the self-attesting nature of the Quran. This is why almost all biblical scholars and practitioners, no matter their apologetic tradition, end up using a variety of kinds of both positive and negative arguments.

The way some proponents articulate this apologetics system can make it sound like a narrow, circular argument. The presuppositionalist will rightly assert that in some sense all reasoning assumes an authority, whether it be the authority of a certain kind of rationality, a methodology that bases its standards on empiricism, or, in their case, Scripture itself. And yet, if presuppositionalists do not modify their approach to emphasize the importance of giving positive evidence for belief like softer versions have done, it will continue to lack a broader appeal as a methodology.²⁰ Moreover, various presuppositionalists themselves have admitted that a weakness in the presuppositional literature is that its authors have not paid sufficient attention to developing various types of specific arguments for Christianity.²¹

Soft versus Hard Presuppositional Apologetics

Hard presuppositionalists maintain that a transcendental argument should be rigidly distinguished from evidence-based arguments.²² However, **soft presuppositionalists**, such as John Frame, argue that the transcendental argument, rather than simply being seen as one argument among many, should be seen as the *goal* of all apologetic

19. John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), xxxii–xxxiii.

20. While hardened forms of presuppositionalism claim an “absolute certain argument” for the biblical God, they lack the specifics of showing how this is done. For this critique, see John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 400.

21. Frame writes, “As he [Habermas] points out, I too have acknowledged that weakness in the presuppositional literature...I am happy to recommend writings of Habermas, Craig, and others in these areas [for Christian evidences].” “A Presuppositional Apologist’s Closing Remarks,” in Cowan, 358.

22. Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998), 496–529.

arguments.²³ In contrast to proponents of hard versions of presuppositionalism, Frame does not expect, “that all the elements of biblical theism are presupposed in intelligible communication.”²⁴ Furthermore, while affirming that Christianity is “absolutely compelling,” soft versions of presuppositionalism allow that individual arguments can be helpful without being certain (i.e., probabilistic arguments) and that Scripture calls for evidence and arguments to be given in support of Christianity.²⁵ Finally, soft presuppositionalists like Frame do not see much difference between direct and indirect arguments. While Frame sees promoting autonomous reasoning as a problem, he does not think that simply arguing in a more direct way necessarily means an apologist is doing so, for the apologist could well be correctly appealing to an unbeliever’s repressed knowledge of God.

The result is that in this soft version of presuppositionalism, the presuppositional apologist is free to employ many, if not all, of the more traditional arguments of classical and evidentialist apologists.²⁶ So what, then, distinguishes Frame’s softer form of presuppositionalism from the other forms of apologetics? Frame acknowledges that on the surface there might not be much difference at all: “It may no longer be possible to distinguish presuppositional apologetics from traditional apologetics merely by externals—by the form of argument, the explicit claim of certainty or probability, etc. Perhaps presuppositionalism is more an attitude of the heart, a spiritual condition, than an easily describable, empirical phenomenon.”²⁷

Experiential/Narrative Apologetics

For reasons that need not concern us in this essay, what I call the experiential narrative approach has not been frequently discussed in conversations about method. Similar to presuppositionalists, experiential/narrative (E/N) apologists stress that all evidence and reasoning depends on a person’s particular framework, and they tend toward pessimism regarding human reason apart from special revelation.²⁸ But whereas presuppositionalists seek to undermine an unbeliever’s rationality in order to show them that they must assume Christian propositions to be rational, E/N apologists

23. Frame writes, “[W]e should be concerned to show that God is the condition of all meaning, and our epistemology should be consistent with that conclusion.” At the same time, Frame affirms that the transcendental argument is not a magic bullet, since its conclusion “cannot be reached in a single, simple syllogism.” He concludes, therefore, that a transcendental argument “normally, perhaps always, requires many sub-arguments...some of [which] may be traditional theistic proofs or Christian evidences. Frame, “Closing Remarks,” in Cowan, 360.

24. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, 316.

25. *Ibid.*

26. John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1994), 85.

27. *Ibid.*, 87.

28. Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 53.

interact with unbelievers by inviting them to participate in an experience and embrace a story that fits better with the actualities of life.²⁹

Many E/N apologists tend to deemphasize the usefulness of the traditional proofs, and some even go so far as to question their propriety. E/N apologetics stresses that “proofs” for Christianity rest not in logical deductions or hard evidence, but in the lives of the community of faith and the power of the apostolic message. Traditional “proofs” for God are problematic because they can deny the essence of Christianity, which is a life and story to be lived out, not a series of propositional statements that can be proven. E/N apologetics, while maintaining the importance of orthodox beliefs such as the incarnation, suffering, and resurrection of Christ, asserts that these truths come to us in story form and must be embraced and lived out in order to be truly understood. Human reason and logic can be helpful in understanding the proclamation of the gospel, but they do not ground the gospel.³⁰ As Myron Penner explains, “One of the serious problems for modern apologetics is that it treats Christianity as if it were an objective ‘something’ (e.g., a set of propositions or doctrines) that can be explained, proven, and cognitively mastered,” when instead, “Christianity...is much more a *way* or an invitation to live (walk, grow) in the truth than it is a doctrine or set of beliefs (a position) whose truth we can grasp and cognitively master, as the modern apologetic paradigm seems to imply.”³¹

At this point you might be asking, “How does this practically play out in the apologetic task?”

Christians are to “prove” the truth of Christianity not by offering people rational arguments, but by ordering our lives around the gospel in ways that display the reality of Jesus. A faithful Christian life is the proof for the truth of the gospel because it “creates the conditions for the intelligibility of the truths of the Christian gospel by publically displaying...a way of being in which its claims make sense—a life that can only be made sense of in terms of those claims.”³²

This does not mean that offering reasons for belief in Christianity is off the table for the E/N apologist. However, their apologetic focuses primarily, and often exclusively, on internal, intuitive reasons. In other words, the gospel story is told and the unbeliever is asked to try it on for size. Rather than offering proofs, the E/N apologist offers invitations for the unbeliever to see how Christianity harmonizes with their deepest human intuitions and life experiences.

29. See Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 67.

30. *Ibid.*, 52, 132.

31. *Ibid.*, 66

32. *Ibid.*, 128

Potential Strengths of Experiential/Narrative Apologetics

First, E/N apologetics rightly emphasizes the importance of human desire and imagination. The E/N approach warns against a dry rationalism, rightly recognizing that Scripture does much more than simply appeal to our brains. E/N apologists also point out that the vast majority of people in today's culture do not arrive at their deepest commitments through "proofs based on simple logic."³³

Adhering to all or a combination of 1) an anthropology that emphasizes love as the primary human motivator, 2) their own observations about the current cultural moment, and 3) the example that Scripture sets, E/N apologists insist that story, images, and creativity are important elements in Christian persuasion. Through these insights, E/N apologetics makes a valuable contribution to apologetics.

Second, by stressing the importance of the corporate church as a living apologetic, E/N apologetics is recovering an ancient, scriptural argument. One of the core arguments in the early church was that Christians lived and died better than anyone else and this type of argument finds a wealth of support in the pages of the New Testament.³⁴

Third, E/N apologetics is concerned with understanding how living in different cultures shapes people's experiences in life. By understanding the framework of a particular culture, the E/N apologist can potentially be in a better position to explain the Christian faith and show how the gospel story both subverts and appeals to the deepest aspirations of that culture.

Potential Weaknesses of Experiential/Narrative Apologetics

First, E/N apologetics can minimize propositional truths and cognitive appeals. Some apologists, perceiving what they see as overly rationalistic approaches dominating contemporary apologetics, perhaps swing the pendulum too far in the opposite direction. While humans are not merely thinking things, thinking is a part of their being. Similarly, while Christianity is not merely made up of propositional statements, propositional statements make up much of the Bible. As Christians we must confess propositional statements—"Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9)—and call on others to do the same. In short, effective E/N apologists will be careful to avoid responding to an apparent reductionism with a reductionism of their own in the opposite direction.

Second, E/N can underutilize historical evidence and linear thinking. Historical evidence is not so conclusive that it can absolutely prove Christianity or coerce someone into acceptance. At the same time, part of Christianity's central

33. David Skeel, while being careful to point out that analytical arguments have their place, emphasizes this point. See his book, *True Paradox: How Christianity Makes Sense of Our Complex World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 23.

34. Recall, for example, the opening explanation of 1 Peter 3:15 in chapter one.

message is the reality that God has acted in human history, entering into space and time in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament itself clearly assumes that historical data is important.

It is one thing to prefer the E/N approach; it is another thing to completely avoid interacting with the historical and logical arguments for and against Christianity. Just as the effective evidence-based apologist will seek to understand the broader frameworks and cultures that form different backgrounds for reasoning and interpretation, so too will the effective E/N apologist acknowledge that competing frameworks can overlap and that historical and logical arguments can be offered—not to coerce anyone into faith, but to persuade them by supporting and confirming Christianity.

The works of agnostic New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman illustrates the problem of ignoring the historical arguments for Christianity. Ehrman has written multiple best sellers that have been absorbed by anxious Christians, former churchgoers, and hardened unbelievers. One of Ehrman's strengths is his ability to take readers on a tour of what he sees as all the Bible's problems while offering a story, a coming of age tale: *He used to be a conservative evangelical Christian, but then he really started studying the Bible with an open mind, and he grew up. He admitted that the Bible was filled with errors and contradictions. It was a struggle, but he cast off the childish myths he had believed his whole life and faced up to the hard facts: the Bible doesn't really have the answers. Christianity isn't true.*

Ehrman's appeal fits in what the E/N apologist's own narrative says about how persuasion works. In response, an E/N apologist might say, "See, a grand story is what is really appealing. We have to tell another story—a better story!" and indeed, they would have a point. But, Ehrman is not *just* telling a story. Ehrman's anti-Christian apologetic is persuasive because it also includes an examination of the biblical and historical evidence.

Effective apologists will not simply reply to someone who has absorbed Ehrman's argument with existential appeals and a proclamation of the gospel. Ehrman and his followers pose skeptical questions that require interaction with historical details: "Doesn't the Gospel of John's high view of Jesus' identity contradict the Synoptic Gospels' low view of Jesus' identity? Didn't Jesus' body just get left on the cross and eaten by animals? Wasn't the 27-book New Testament canon created because of a power play in the early Church? Wasn't the New Testament forged?" Adequately answering questions such as these requires that an apologist be aware not just of the

frameworks and existential appeals being used, but also of the evidence associated with these issues.³⁵

Soft versus Hard Experiential/Narrative Apologetics

N. T. Wright's book *Simply Christian* serves as an example of what could be called **soft experiential/narrative apologetics**.³⁶ Four basic human experiences, namely the quest for spirituality, a longing for justice, a hunger for relationships, and a delight in beauty (which Wright describes as the "echoes of a voice"), function as the threads that run through this apologetic.³⁷ Wright takes up each of these signposts one at a time, connecting Christian belief with common human experience.

For instance, in reference to the "echo" of a longing for justice, Wright asserts that "simply being human and living in the world" means we have an intuitive desire for justice.³⁸ The Christian story offers an explanation, suggesting that obtaining justice "remains one of the great human goals and dreams" because we have all "heard, deep within [our]selves, the echo of a voice which calls us to live like that." Moreover, the Christian story explains that the source of this voice, God himself, became human in the person of Jesus Christ and did what was necessary in order that justice could ultimately be done for all.³⁹

Essentially, what Wright is saying is, "Just about everyone has this sense that things are just not right with the world? So, what story best explains this intuition and provides the resources for us to respond appropriately? In addition to a longing for justice, Wright does this with each of the four human experiences—commending the Christian story as the best account of the human experience."⁴⁰

35. In responding to Bart Ehrman, my co-authors and I sought to both help readers see the problem with his narrative, offer a story that is more in line with reality, and interact with the historical evidence. See Darrell Bock, Josh Chatraw, and Andreas Kostenberger, *Truth in a Culture of Doubt: Engaging Skeptical Challenges to the Bible* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2014) and the more popular version, Darrell Bock, Josh Chatraw, and Andreas Kostenberger, *Truth Matters: Confident Faith in a Confusing World* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2014).

36. I am specifically using Wright's book *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006) as an example of an E/N apologetic approach rather than including Wright as a figure that necessarily represents this camp in all of his writings. Wright himself does not normally identify himself as an apologist, though he can easily be considered one of Christianity's leading apologists. However, unlike the other *softer* representatives in this chapter, he has not directly entered the apologetic methodology debate. In fact, the E/N approach is a general description for what I have observed a variety of different Christian authors doing, who have either not articulated their methodology in detail or, for various reasons, remain at the periphery of many of these methodological discussions.

37. Wright adds that these echoes "are among the things which the postmodern, post-Christian, and now increasingly post-secular world cannot escape as questions—strange signposts pointing beyond the landscape of our contemporary culture and out into the unknown" (*Simply Christian*, xi).

38. *Ibid.*, 10.

39. *Ibid.*, 15.

40. *Ibid.*, 55.

What you don't find in *Simply Christian* are the syllogisms or step-by-step arguments that you encounter in traditional classical or evidential approaches.⁴¹ Wright believes that the world we live in is complex, made up of such realities as stories, rituals, beauty, work, and belief which intertwine, to give life a rich texture. Because it is to this complex, richly-textured world that Christianity speaks, becoming a believer in Christ and learning the deeper kind of truth—the source of what makes life mysterious and beautiful and profound—is more like getting to know a person and less like memorizing a series of propositions. The fundamental problem people have is not that they are “ignorant and need better information,” but rather that they are “lost and need someone to come and find [them], stuck in the quicksand waiting to be rescued, dying and in need of a new life...” It is for this reason that Wright's apologetic approach in *Simply Christian* is not to introduce people to logical propositions, but rather to the Christian story and the person of Jesus.

Simply Christian's softened approach is different than idealized versions, which could be called **hard E/N apologetics**, in that Wright sees the importance of making historical and evidentially-based arguments, leading him to offer short arguments for both the reliability of New Testament gospel accounts and the historicity of Jesus' bodily resurrection.⁴² But even here, Wright acknowledges that one can logically adopt other positions. He also goes on to note the importance of how the assumptions that make up people's interpretive frameworks influence how they interpret evidence.⁴³ *Simply Christian* serves as an example of *soft* E/N apologetics because it focuses—albeit not exclusively—on human experience and the explanatory power of the Christian story.

A Way Forward

Imagine that a friend asks you to draw a map that would direct her to your hometown. You enthusiastically draw her a map from your extensive knowledge only to watch her respond with confusion. Despite your emphatic assertions that “this is definitely the best way”, she seems unconvinced. What you may find out, however, is that you have drawn the map coming from the opposite direction she is coming from, and she is riding a bike rather than a car. In other words, a different route was needed. This scenario depicts what often occurs in debates on apologetic method, when some apologists (who advocate the hard version of the apologetic method they adhere to) essentially say that there is only *one* route—theirs—that really works when taking someone on the apologetic journey to Christianity.

However, apologists who adhere to the soft versions of their respective apologetic method recognize there are other ways to draw the map. The interaction between

41. *Ibid.*, 48–50, 55, 57.

42. *Ibid.*, 113.

43. *Ibid.*, 114.

advocates of the soft versions suggests that they still think their apologetic map offers the best explanation for Christianity, but they are (rightly) open to other ways to get there. Their debates are not about whether other maps can be drawn, but rather about *which is the best map*. Finding the best map, however, is not contingent on copying some sort of eternal, universal apologetic map. No such map exists. What these discussions among the advocates of soft versions have not emphasized enough is that different types of apologetic maps not only *can* be drawn, but *should* be drawn. The best apologetic map for any given situation depends on who will be using the map. The demands of pastoral ministry underscore this point.

Pastor-Apologetists, which I would suggest is an identity that all pastors should embrace, find themselves needing to ask: Am I drawing an apologetic map for a scientist who has a rigid methodology for determining truth? An academic philosopher from the West? A father whose son died of cancer at the age of seven? A devout Muslim who moved to America from the Middle East? A mother whose son came out of the closet? A Western businessman who has it all and adheres to a different vision of the good life than the one on offered by Christianity? A first-generation Asian American who thinks about life in eastern categories?

As Edward Carnell wrote concerning apologetics over half a century ago, the *best* apologetic maps are person-specific:

Philosophers err when they confine their attention to “universal man.” There is only one real man: the suffering, fearing individual on the street; he who is here today and gone tomorrow; he whose heart is the scene of a relentless conflict between the self as it is and the self as it ought to be. Whenever a philosopher speaks of mankind in the abstract, rather than concrete individuals at home and in the market, he deceives both himself and all who have faith in his teaching.⁴⁴

Thus, the best maps are not drawn for “mankind in the abstract” but for “concrete individuals.” Nor are we drawing apologetic maps for ourselves. We are drawing maps for others, which means our apologetic should be others-centered.⁴⁵ It also means that while all of the maps should have the same final destination, the person and work of Jesus Christ, there are various types of maps that can and should be drawn.⁴⁶

44. Edward J. Carnell, *Christian Commitment: An Apologetic* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1957), 2.

45. Of course, for Christians everything we do, including apologetics, should first be “God-centered.”

46. Of course, more needs to be said concerning apologetic method. With my co-author, Mark Allen, I have tried to set out a framework for apologetic conversations that incorporates the strengths of each the methods surveyed in this article while placing the gospel at the center. See Joshua D. Chatraw and Mark D. Allen, *Apologetics at the Cross: An Introduction for Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).