Presuppositionalism in a Broader Apologetic Framework

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Throughout the history of Christian apologetics—"that branch of Christian theology which seeks to provide a rational justification for the truth claims of the Christian faith"—a variety of methods have been championed.[1] There is not one single method that definitively outperforms all others in every context: each has advantages and drawbacks. Relevant for apologists to consider are the functional coherence and practical benefits of any given methodology. Presuppositionalism argues from the epistemological perspective that reality only makes sense on the Christian worldview. It argues that foundational presuppositions about reason, logic, and morality are ultimately explainable solely according to a Christian metaphysic. Hence, its primary goal is to demonstrate the inconsistencies in opposing worldviews. Given the thrust of contemporary apologetic issues related to the reliability of the Bible, the problem of evil, and the nature of truth, apologists should reevaluate the coherence and effectiveness of presuppositionalism in our current culture. In this paper, I argue that presuppositionalism is internally incoherent but may yet be effectively utilized within a broader apologetic framework. I will demonstrate this first by explicating its logical circularity, and then by showing how its insights can be incorporated into relevant contexts.

With the rise of the postmodern movement since the mid-twentieth century, Westerners today are not asking, in general, the same questions that once permeated their thinking. Christians were accustomed to the assumption of biblical authority. To take one example, their curiosity related to how a man could last three days inside a large fish. Now, taking that same narrative, Christians, especially those in a deconstruction process, are wondering how God could

[1] William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 15. Evidential methods would be classicalism, evidentialism, cultural apologetics, cumulative-case apologetics, verificational apologetics, and ecclesial apologetics. Epistemological (or non-evidential) methods would be presuppositionalism and reformed epistemology.

allow a man to experience the trauma of being trapped in a large fish for such a long period of time. A scientific inquiry has turned into a moral dispute of God's character. The Bible itself has faced historical challenges, but now it faces the challenges of relativism and moral scrutiny. Identity and feelings, rather than objective truth, have become trademark themes of twenty-first century debate. Both believers and unbelievers are experiencing its impact. This cultural shift represents the relevant context for which apologetics must be evaluated. How well does presuppositionalism function in the current state of our culture?

The effectiveness of apologetics within a particular context can have eternal consequences. If there is a lack of cultural awareness tied to apologetic methodology, our speech can either be ineffective or spiritually detrimental. When analyzing philosophical and theological components of a particular methodology, it can become a matter of a conceptual exchange of ideas. It is crucial to keep in mind that apologetics is both an intellectual and a practical discipline. The goal is not to "win" an argument or make the most evidentially compelling case for Christian theism. Instead, the purpose is to bring unbelievers to Christ through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. If apologetics only benefits believers' academic standing or is a matter of seizing the intellectual high ground, it fails to be practiced as a truly *Christian* discipline. The strength of argumentation is relevant only insofar as it breaks down the unbeliever's stumbling blocks, opening the path to faith. Imagine an unbeliever who has experienced trauma from the church. A worldview analysis will likely do nothing to move them towards faith. Now imagine an unbeliever who doubts God's existence because their child died of cancer. Offering a free will defense in this context may in fact move them further from faith. Apologetics requires wisdom. People's hearts are on the line. For this reason, Christians ought to assess the pragmatic success of methodologies, which is not to say that truth is determined by

pragmatic concerns. As Christians, how we relate to the world matters. As apologists, how we formulate our defense matters.

According to presuppositionalism, there exists an epistemological and spiritual *antithesis* between believers and unbelievers that prevents meaningful rational discourse. Unbelievers adopt a worldview with insufficient presuppositions to account for metaphysical reality. Unbelievers are also in a state of suppressing the truth as a result of the noetic effects of the fall. Due to this antithesis, facts, arguments, and other forms of evidence cannot be properly evaluated. The solution, according to presuppositionalists, is to find epistemological common ground or non-competing epistemological frameworks. They argue that the only acceptable common ground is the Christian worldview, for any other worldview does not correspond to reality. As James Anderson writes, "It is only through the lens of a biblical Christian worldview that we can account for human knowledge and make sense of the world we inhabit."[2] That is, unbelievers must accept beliefs consistent with a Christian worldview regarding creation, God's nature, and the epistemic authority of God's Word as preconditions for reason, logic, and morality. Since "any correct concept the non-Christian knows requires processes of reasoning that are dependent on a Christian conception of reality," Christian presuppositions act as the necessary criteria for all other sources of knowledge.[3] Only by presupposing Christian theism can unbelievers objectively and accurately interpret evidence in apologetic discourse.

Apologists have offered several critiques of presuppositionalism since it was first developed by Cornelius Van Til. Since there is no flawless apologetic method, we will focus on

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[2] James N. Anderson, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Understanding Christian Apologetics: 5 Methods for Defending the Faith*, ed. Timothy Paul Jones (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2025) 93.
[3] Timothy Paul Jones, ed., *Understanding Christian Apologetics: 5 Methods for Defending the Faith* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2025), 11.

the logical fallacy of circularity or begging the question (*petitio principii*). Internally critiquing competing worldviews through the lens of Christian theism—or defending the Christian worldview by presupposing the truthfulness of the Christian worldview—is widely acknowledged as being logically circular. William Lane Craig rhetorically emphasizes that "It is difficult to imagine how anyone could with a straight face think to show theism to be true by reasoning, 'God exists. Therefore, God exists.' Nor is this said from the standpoint of unbelief. A Christian theist himself will deny that question-begging arguments prove anything."[4] Presuppositionalists admit their circularity, but they argue that any method must be circular. As John Frame remarks, "But are we not still forced to say, 'God exists (presupposition), therefore God exists (conclusion),' and isn't that argument clearly circular? Yes, in a way. But that is unavoidable for any system, any worldview. For God is the ultimate standard of meaning, truth, and rationality."[5] The error here is thinking that we must *presuppose* God as the standard of truth in order to demonstrate that God *is* the standard of truth (which effectively reduces to "He is because He is").

It is important to understand that circularity does not make all or even most of the fundamental claims of presuppositionalism false. However, it does seriously call into question its ability to function as a distinct, complete, and coherent methodology. Attempting to practice it in its own logically fallacious framework will be either off-putting or reinforce belief in the

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[4] William Lane Craig, "Presuppositional Apologetics: A Classicalist Apologist's Response," in *Five Views on Apologetics,* ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000) 233. Furthermore, Habermas accuses Frame of committing another informal fallacy, the false analogy, by appealing to rationalism and empiricism as analogies to presuppose God and Scripture. Habermas, "Presuppositional Apologetics: An Evidentialist's Response," 242.

[5] John M. Frame, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 217. Although he admits circularity, he believes this circularity is linear and non-vicious.

irrationality of Christian theism for skeptics. Despite its shortcomings, it has much to offer to apologetics. So how can we incorporate the findings of presuppositionalism within a broader framework that is contextually relevant while avoiding its methodological deficiencies?

A number of presuppositional claims, which are agreed upon by apologetics who differ methodologically, should be seen as foundational to apologetics. First, recognizing hidden worldview assumptions and developing internal critiques of opposing worldviews are significant aspects of a rational defense. Every worldview contains presuppositions about God that, knowingly or unknowingly, inform and shape rational processes. It is true that a person's worldview influences how they interpret evidence. Unbelievers themselves can benefit from an apologist exposing the internal incoherence of their worldview. This can be defined as the skill of worldview analysis or, as Sean McDowell puts it, presuppositional reasoning—the apologetic strategy of challenging a person with an opposing worldview to justify rationality and other metaphysical truths strictly in accordance with their worldview presuppositions—which is an indispensable tool for all Christian apologists.[6]

Moreover, presuppositional apologetics rightly claims that the triune God is the reason for the existence of reality and all metaphysical truths. Apologists from all methodological perspectives can agree that humanity's access to knowledge is contingent on the existence and will of God.[7] Since God is the source of knowledge, non-Christian worldviews must borrow from Christian theism and are thereby incoherent on their own right. Similarly, apologetics is

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[6] Sean McDowell, "Presuppositional Apologetics: Evidential Apologetics Response," in *Understanding Christian Apologetics: 5 Methods for Defending the Faith*, ed. Timothy Paul Jones (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2025), 97.

[7] Melissa Cain Travis, "Presuppositional Apologetics: Classical Apologetics Response," in *Understanding Christian Apologetics: 5 Methods for Defending the Faith*, ed. Timothy Paul Jones (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2025) 95.

only powerful and persuasive insofar as the minds of unbelievers are enlightened by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:11-16). It is also true that there exists no epistemological *neutral* ground shared by both believers and unbelievers, as if they can put their worldview and concomitant presuppositions aside. Everyone brings biases to the table of discussion. To summarize these technical findings: where presuppositionalism can significantly contribute to a rational defense for Christian theism is how it presses skeptics to reconsider the entirety of their worldview system rather than merely their interpretation of particular facts and evidence.

Here I will sketch a hypothetical interaction between a skeptic and a Christian presuppositionalist, where the apologist cannot functionally deviate from their presuppositional methodology. An apologist approaches a skeptic and began a conversation of faith, to which the skeptic says, "I'm an agnostic. I believe Jesus was a real person who died on a cross and who taught the highest ethical teachings. I also cannot think of any reasonable explanation for the empty tomb other than a resurrection, but I still have yet to see enough evidence for it." The presuppositional apologist could respond in multiple ways: "you say that Jesus's teachings are ethical, but by what standard are you saying his teachings are good?" or "since resurrection cannot happen naturally, we must assume that the triune God exists." See, presuppositionalism forces the apologist to look beyond actual statements and critique the underlying epistemological foundations in order to move forward with the skeptic. It does not allow for addressing specific doubts, challenges, and concerns *until* their entire worldview has been uprooted. If they begin with evidence before dealing with how the unbelievers' worldview accounts for logic, reason, and morality, they have forfeited their own methodology. This illustrates the methodological rigidness of presuppositionalism that results in practical ineffectiveness.

Taking this same hypothetical interaction, here is how one could incorporate presuppositional tools into a larger evidential framework. The skeptic is on the cusp of believing that the resurrection is plausible, so what they need is evidence for it, not a worldview analysis. The apologist can now respond to this effect: "I can see you are an honest, rational thinker. First, let me ask, 'what evidence have you heard for the resurrection?' … second, 'what standard of evidence would need to be met for you to believe, so I have an idea of your historical criteria?' … now, since you're an agnostic, let's neither assume that God exists nor that God does not exist, but let's agree that God's existence is *possible*." The skeptic proceeds to give an unwarranted historical criteria for the resurrection—essentially the "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" slogan. Subsequently, the apologist, using worldview analysis found in presuppositionalism, demonstrates why holding to that standard results in a breakdown of their worldview. Two reasons: first, most past events could not meet that standard, and so they would be left with skepticism regarding almost every historical event; and second, we have already agreed that God's existence is possible, so in that case, a supernatural explanation is not less likely than a naturalistic one. The apologist then proceeds to offer evidence according to a realistic historical criteria. The key difference from the first sketch is the ability to offer a rational defense according to whatever the context dictates. In this case, the skeptic needs an explanation of the evidence for the resurrection. Viewing every apologetic encounter as an "all or nothing" endeavor is not as effective at reaching unbelievers as merely offering specific reasons for believing in Christian theism based on the context.

Thinking back to the aspects contemporary culture—questioning God's moral integrity, authority of the Bible, relativism, and ethics related to gender and sexual identity—presuppositionalism can aid us in our apologetics. For instance, an unbeliever who challenges

God's moral character should be questioned on the standard by which they make that assertion. They must be able to provide an objective moral standard for their judgments, which the apologist can then argue is only consistent with a Christian metaphysic. However, an unbeliever who doubts the biblical God because they do not agree with the Bible's teaching on homosexuality does not need an entire excurses on epistemic authority. Instead, what they need is the *gospel*. Incorporating presuppositional claims into a broader apologetic framework, rather than attempting to practice apologetic solely through a presuppositional framework, not only helps apologists address the precise context, but it also helps apologists locate and promote the gospel more smoothly.

We concluded that presuppositionalism's logical circularity raises serious questions regarding its coherence and practical effectiveness. However, its incoherence should not dissuade apologists from implementing its foundational claims and insights. Hypothetical scenarios were sketched to demonstrate the benefits of presuppositionalism within a broader framework that enables the apologist to argue for Christian theism in the most beneficial manner for the unbeliever. Apologists should consider the relevance of their arguments and defenses to the needs of the unbeliever. As mentioned, apologetics is not merely an academic or theoretical discipline. Rather, it is a Christian practice of removing intellectual stumbling blocks *in order to produce spiritual fruits*. This applies to both believers and unbelievers. The goal of apologetics is transformational growth in heart and mind. The Holy Spirit uses rational argumentation to bring people nearer to God. This includes Christians as well. Having a flexible approach, therefore, is more beneficial than a rigid approach. Ultimately, what every person needs is the gospel. Context dictates what stumbling blocks must be addressed for the gospel presentation to be most

effective. Therefore, presuppositionalism should not be used as a distinct method, but it can and should be embraced within a larger apologetic approach.

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