

A Proposal on the Occasion and the Method of Presenting Evidence within a Van Tillian Framework

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INTRODUCTION

Given the length limitation of this essay, this paper will attempt to provide a broad thumbnail sketch of the principles of when and how to present evidence within the framework of Cornelius Van Til's apologetics. Before this task, the paper will first address some critics who believe that presuppositionalism is anti-evidence. The second part of this paper will momentarily survey Van Tillians' attempts to flesh out a uniquely presuppositional philosophy of evidence.¹ After this, the essay will outline the principles involved in the practical application of presenting evidence (when to present evidence and how). Finally, the paper will make some brief exegetical observations of how Jesus presented evidence from Luke 5:23 to demonstrate that the method delineated here does enjoy some biblical precedence.

PART I: IS THERE EVIDENCE OF VAN TIL BEING AGAINST EVIDENCE?

Recently, Douglas Groothuis criticized presuppositionalism during a blog review of a Van Tillian debating an atheist²:

Those trained in apologetics, will note that Wilson uses the Van Tillian presuppositional method (with some help from C.S. Lewis on objective moral law). This approach, while helpful for critiquing non-Christian worldviews, has deep limitations in apologetics, since it can marshal no genuine constructive arguments based on natural theology, science, and history.³

¹ Philosophy of evidence and philosophy of facts are used interchangeably here.

² *Collision: Christopher Hitchens v.s. Doug Wilson*, DVD, (Crux Pictures, 2009).

³ Douglas Groothuis, "'Collision' DVD Review," The Constructive Curmudgeon Blog, entry posted on November 7th, 2009, <http://theconstructivecurmudgeon.blogspot.com/2009/11/collision-dvd-review.html> (accessed November 10th, 2009).

Groothuis is not alone in his criticism that presuppositionalism is unable to employ evidences from the realm of science and history. In his response to presuppositionalism, Gary Habermas has charged Van Tillians for their inability “to produce their own detailed, evidential arguments in favor of Christianity.”⁴ Even during Van Til’s own life time, Clark Pinnock charged that in Van Til’s “philosophy of evidences he disregards and restricts its force.”⁵ In his contribution to Van Til’s *Festschrift*, evidentialist John Warwick Montgomery opined that Van Til’s defense of the faith is circular and “at the same time eliminates all possibility of offering a positive demonstration of the truth of the Christian view.”⁶ Evidently (pun intended!), there is a stream of critics who have concluded that there is no place for evidence in presuppositionalism. Ironically, some of Van Til’s supporters have assumed that to be true as well. Thom Notaro notes:

Both friends and foes of Dr. Van Til have commonly attributed this outlook to him. And perhaps that consensus is no more pronounced than in the mistaken assumption that Van Til allows no room for the use of evidence in defending Christianity.⁷

Yet closer reading and familiarity of Van Til’s corpus reveals that he was not against evidence in defending the faith per se. Van Til himself has written a course on Christian evidences and penned these words: “...Christian theism must be defended against non-theistic science. Evidences, then, is a subdivision of apologetics in the broader sense of the word, and is coordinated with apologetics in the more limited sense of the word.”⁸ Elsewhere, Van Til writes, “Evidences deals largely with the historical while apologetics deals largely with the philosophical aspect. Each has its own work to do but they should constantly be in touch with one another.”⁹

Van Til acknowledged the validity of presenting evidence outside of Scripture when he stated, “I would therefore engage in historical apologetics,” and

⁴ Gary Habermas, “Presuppositional Apologetics: An Evidential Response,” in *Five Views of Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 239.

⁵ Clark Pinnock, “The Philosophy of Christian Evidences,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, edited by E.R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 421.

⁶ John Warwick Montgomery, “Once upon an A Priori...” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, edited by E.R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 387.

⁷ Thom Notaro, *Van Til And The Use Of Evidence*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 8.

⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), i.

⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1947), 3.

confessed that “I do not personally do a great deal of this because my colleagues in the other departments of the Seminary in which I teach are doing it better than I could do it.”¹⁰ Perhaps part of the reasoning of those who believe Van Til is against evidence is the absence of Van Til’s actual discussion of the extra-biblical evidences vindicating Christianity. If this is so, this would be rather sloppy reasoning on the part of Van Til’s critics in their commitment of the logical fallacy of arguing from silence.¹¹

PART II: WAITING ‘TIL VAN TIL’S PHILOSOPHY OF EVIDENCE IS HERE

While Van Til was not against Christian evidences, he was particular in that evidences should not be given in any fashion that would appease the autonomy (self-rule) of the unbeliever. Christian evidences must be presented in a Christ-honoring fashion. Yet what does a Christ-honoring way of presenting evidence look like from the Van Tillian perspective?

Thom Notaro has written a booklet that focused specifically on Van Til’s apologetics and evidence.¹² Alejandro Moreno Morrison has written two articles, the first in essence is a summary of presuppositionalism¹³ and the second concludes that “evidence as a direct, positive, demonstrative tool, not merely as a heuristic or complementary tool (as in ‘positive inductive apologetics’), has no room in vertical argumentation (from immanent to transcendent)” and sees evidence most useful in negative apologetics, where “in the horizontal level, evidence is in its jurisdiction and, duly submitted to the Lordship of Yahweh, can militate in the holy war against unbelief, demonstrating the folly of these creaturely attacks against God.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 32.

¹¹ To demand that Van Til should have engaged in presenting historical or scientific evidence when he acknowledged others could do better is rather unfair and is analogous to the demand that a Creationist apologist should produce an Old Testament textual critical commentary in order to “prove” that the scientist believes textual criticism is a legitimate sphere in the defense of the faith.

¹² Thom Notaro, *Van Til And The Use Of Evidence*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

¹³ Alejandro Moreno Morrison, “The Role and Use Of Evidence In Reformed Presuppositional Apologetics: Part 1of 2,” *Reformed Perspective Magazine* 2, no. 37 (September 11 to September 17, 2000), http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/ale_moreno/PT.Moreno.Evidence.1.html (accessed November 19, 2009).

¹⁴ Alejandro Moreno Morrison, “The Role and Use Of Evidence In Reformed Presuppositional Apologetics: Part 2of 2,” *Reformed Perspective Magazine* 2, no. 39 (September 25 to October 1, 2000), http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/ale_moreno/PT.Moreno.Evidence.2.html (accessed November 19, 2009).

During his exchange with Habermas, presuppositionalist John Frame has admitted the current weakness of this area in presuppositionalism:

He says that presuppositionalists have been unwilling to develop thorough treatments of Christian evidences from a distinctively presuppositional point of view but have either ignored evidences or relied on writers of other schools of thought. As he points out, I too have acknowledged that weakness in the presuppositional literature. I would hope to remedy that sometime, unless a fellow presuppositionalist beats me to it.¹⁵

It seems that what Frame has to say is true of a Van Tillian philosophy of evidence in general and of the practical application of giving evidence (when and how) in particular. However, to Frame's credit, his work does provide the parameters and general direction toward this end.

PART III: PRESENTING EVIDENCES

Any principles of a Van Tillian presentation of evidence¹⁶ will have to take into account at least three tenets of presuppositionalism: (1) There exist no brute facts, (2) there is no religious neutrality, (3) and unbelievers suppress the truth.

a. When to give evidence is dependent upon the unbeliever's philosophy of evidence:

Van Til is quite insightful in his observation that there is no such thing as "brute" facts, or "facts in themselves." There are times when one "fact" is viewed by one group of people as a fact while another group rejects the same claim as a fact. At the root of the issue is one's philosophy of facts which determines what the facts will be. In order for something to be a fact, it must satisfy one's criteria of what a fact should be. Van Til is correct when he writes:

The battle is not one primarily of this fact or of that fact. The battle is basically with respect to a philosophy of facts. The non-believer virtually makes a universal negative proposition about God every time he engages in his scientific effort. Even when he thinks

¹⁵ John Frame, "A Presuppositional Apologist's Closing Remarks" in *Five Views of Apologetics*, edited by Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 358.

¹⁶ I have spelled out these principles in a teaching outline with acronyms for memorization at :

Jimmy Li, "The Importance of Presuppositions: They Determine Evidence," Truth Evangelical Assistance Ministry, http://teamtruth.com/articles/art_importanceofpresuppositions.htm (accessed November 19, 2009).

teleologically in the way that Aristotle did and proves the existence of a God, he is still assuming that God is not and cannot be the Creator and Redeemer of the world.¹⁷

This truth has implications for the practical question of when to give evidence. In asking the question of when to give evidence, a similar question must also be asked of when it is inappropriate to give evidence. If the nonbeliever's philosophy of facts is already problematic, then any evidence that the Christian may cite will readily be dismissed by their flawed philosophy of facts. During such an occasion, rather than give evidence, it would be more fruitful for the Christian to first address the nonbeliever's philosophy of facts. In light of the primacy of one's philosophy of facts in the endeavor of apologetics, it is no wonder that presuppositionalists have put so much concentration on epistemology (theory of knowledge) in the process of apologetics, more so than the traditional schools of apologetics.¹⁸

Practically, to find out whether or not it is appropriate to present evidence to the nonbeliever, it is important to get nonbelievers to divulge their philosophy of facts and other important epistemological presuppositions before any evidence is presented. Towards this purpose, good questions to ask nonbelievers are, "What would make you believe in X?", or "What do you believe must be true in order for you to believe in X?" Press them to list their criteria of evidences as concretely as possible, instead of just using slogans like "I believe if it's reasonable." Rather, find out what are the actual criteria that the individual has that make the unbeliever think that a claim is reasonable. Whether or not the occasion warrants a presentation of evidence is dependent upon the content of the nonbeliever's criteria of evidence. If the criteria has already precluded Christianity, no evidence shall be presented, but rather the discussion should center on the problem of the nonbeliever's philosophy of facts, and epistemological arguments should be brought up to demonstrate that their philosophy of facts are self-refuting, incoherent or arbitrary.¹⁹ Nonbelievers are not religiously neutral, and as sinners they tend to suppress the truth. Therefore it should not surprise Christians that often they will spend the bulk of their time in the critique of presuppositions rather than presenting evidence. There shouldn't be an apology on the part of Van Tillians concerning this, just as one would not expect apologies from good lawyers that might spend more time during pre-trial sessions deliberating with the courtroom about what constitutes as evidence fit for the trial rather than devoting

¹⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1947). Cited in *The Works of Cornelius Van Til*, (New York: Labels Army Company, 1997).

¹⁸ In fact, this discussion of philosophy of facts is epistemological in nature! Trying to determine one's own philosophy of facts and that of others in addition to the justification of these methods is an epistemological task.

¹⁹ This will require some familiarity of the various presuppositional arguments and methods.

time to the actual presentation of the evidences themselves during the trial. Similarly, when asked by a fool, "When was the last time you beat your wife?" most people wisely address the presuppositions ("How do you know I beat my wife in the first place?" or "I don't even have a wife!") rather than entertain by giving evidences ("She has no bruise, and logically I have proof of it not occurring this week."). It seems to reflect wise stewardship of Christian evidence on the part of the apologist if evidences were to be presented only upon the condition that the unbeliever's philosophy of evidence would allow for the evidential value of the Christian evidence. Ultimately, a good philosophy of evidence is really a Christian's philosophy of evidence, whether or not the unbeliever will acknowledge or suppress the truth of it at that moment. More of this will be discussed in section "c."

b. How to give evidence and take captives:

Since the apologist is to present the evidence only when the nonbeliever has laid out a good criteria of evidence, there is always the chance that the unbeliever begins to suppress the truth when they see where it inevitably leads. The individual then decides to renounce his former philosophy of evidence and adopts a new one in the middle of the discussion. Knowing the intellectual depravity of man (Ephesians 4:17), Christians are to be innocent as doves but wise as serpents in how they handle the delivery of the evidence.²⁰ It is impossible for a man to control another man's heart (it is even difficult for one to control his own heart!) and therefore it is impossible for a Christian to stop the nonbeliever from suppressing the truth, since any softening of the heart comes only from the Holy Spirit. What the apologist can do is make it difficult for the nonbeliever to deny the conclusion of the evidence. If the nonbeliever does happen to have a good philosophy of evidence which allows Christian evidence to be presented, the next step for the apologist should be trying to get the nonbeliever himself to illustrate the application of his philosophy of evidence by having him prove something else by the means of his philosophy of evidence. For instance, a good philosophy of history will demonstrate that Jesus existed, and will also demonstrate that Julius Caesar existed. The purpose of this exercise is to take the nonbeliever hostage to the good philosophy of evidence: It is like strapping him onto the very same philosophy of evidence that he strapped onto Christianity showing that both straps are controlled by the same detonator. If the nonbeliever wishes to demolish the good philosophy of evidence he adhered to earlier to take Christianity out, he is going to go with it. With the previous example of the existence of Jesus, if the nonbeliever now discards his philosophy of evidence, the obvious fact of Caesar also applies to Jesus, thereby reducing the field of history to being unintelligible and meaningless within the nonbeliever's

²⁰ Every apologist should pray to God for practical wisdom in presenting evidences. God will provide them the wisdom if they fear the LORD, which is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7) and if they ask the LORD for wisdom (James 1:5).

worldview. Any new or modified philosophy of evidence proposed that does not lead to the intelligibility of Christian evidences takes the apologist back to square one, where hostile philosophy of evidences is refuted.

However, at times nonbelievers still hold onto the good philosophy of evidence, but they won't accept a conclusion that vindicates Christianity. In which case the nonbeliever is to be pressed as to how the same method vindicating Christianity is the same method which concluded something he had earlier affirmed was true. Not only should the apologist press the nonbeliever on his inconsistencies, the Christian should also call the nonbeliever on his sinful idolatry of autonomy and suppression of the truth. This seems to be the practical way of taking all things captive, or hostage, to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

c. Exposing impossibility of neutrality is a beeline to the gospel

Any good apologetics ought to have the gospel presented alongside it. Actual practice of the steps above should make the apologist conclude that the nonbeliever is not religiously neutral. Van Til's observation about "facts" is telling:

It is commonly taken for granted that the scientist who begins simply with the 'facts' is neutral. Yet he cannot but take the facts either as created or as non-created. If he takes them as non-created he has already at the outset excluded the notion of God's interpretation of the facts. Thus he has virtually assumed his own mind to be the ultimate interpreter of the facts. In short, he has come to his task of interpreting facts with a non-Christian philosophy of facts.²¹

It is also surprising how nonbelievers are quick to observe that Christians are not neutral in their interpretation of the world, but are blind to how they are not religiously neutral either. Some even argue that religious neutrality is philosophically possible, but in actuality it is philosophically impossible.²² The nonbeliever is to be exposed to the fact that he is not religiously neutral, that his mind and will are hostile towards God and He will judge men's sins. This makes a great "beeline" to the gospel: man's sin, God's holiness, Christ's death on the cross for sinners, and salvation by God's grace alone through faith in Christ alone.

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978). Cited in *The Works of Cornelius Van Til*, (New York: Labels Army Company, 1997).

²² Jimmy Li, "Impossible Neutrality: An Analogy from Humanistic Geography," *Reformed Perspective Magazine* 9, no. 33 (August 12 to August 18, 2007), http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/jim_li/jim_li.impossibleneutrality.html (accessed November 19, 2009).

PART IV: WHAT DID JESUS DO?

Presuppositionalism has stressed the importance of the Bible as the norm in all spheres of life including apologetics. Does the method proposed in this essay find any biblical support? One possibility is found in the story as told by Jesus in Luke 5:17-26, specifically in Luke 5:23. In the immediate context of verse 21, the religious leaders have ruled out that Jesus can forgive the paralytic's sin given their theological presuppositions that only God can forgive sins, and Jesus to them was not God. In Luke 5:23, the NASB translates the phrase "ti estin eukopoteron" as "Which is easier..." this introduces the question that Jesus will ask in verse 23. The question Jesus asked in verse 23 is a counter-question, and the intent is to challenge the group who were questioning Him in their hearts (cf. v. 21-22).²³ Beginning the question with a phrase, Bock writes, "The question that Jesus raises is asked from the observer's perspective."²⁴ What is exegetically significant is that here Jesus is challenging their skeptical question of Him by asking His listeners to act as observers and then consider His question. The phrase above is fascinating with how Jesus phrased His question to challenge the scribes and the Pharisees. According to Plummer, the Greek word "eukopoteron" literally means "more capable of being done with easy labor."²⁵ Plummer goes on to note that this term is always in the comparative in the New Testament.²⁶ In the phrase, Jesus is setting up His counter-question offense by demanding His skeptics answer a question of comparison of what would be easier, something that is determined by one's presuppositions of what is and isn't possible.

In the next phrase "eipen apheotai soi ai hamartia sou ei eipen egeire kai peripatei", the NASB translates this as "...to say, 'Your sins have been forgiven you,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'" The two competing options of what is easiest to say are, "Your sins have been forgiven you" or telling a paralyzed man to get up and walk. There is an incredible working logic behind Jesus' challenging question, which is deeply presuppositional in character. At a superficial level, Bock explains that "the logic of the question is easy to follow: it is easier to say something that cannot be visually verified than to say something that can be visually substantiated. The easier claim from the observer's point of view is the

²³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary, edited by Donald A. Hagner and I. Howard Marshall, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), 214.

²⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1:1:1-9:50*, BECNT, 12 vols., edited by Moises Silva, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994) ,485.

²⁵ Alfred Plummer, *The Gospel According to S. Luke*. The International Critical Commentary, edited by Alfred Plummer, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Briggs, (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1975), 156.

²⁶ Ibid.

claim to forgive sins, since one cannot prove it wrong!”²⁷ Stein adds, “It is easier to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven’ than, ‘Get up and walk’ because the legitimacy of the former cannot be disproved whereas the latter can if no healing takes place.”²⁸ This particular angle stresses the primacy of the presupposition of empirical verification. However, there is another dimension to this question, since from another perspective it is truly harder to say “Your sins have been forgiven.” This perspective takes the theological orientation seriously. Stein explains that “since God alone can forgive sins and since numerous people, both in and out of the Bible, have performed healings, the former is more difficult to do.”²⁹ Marshall is correct when he stated that “the implication is that neither act is possible for a man, certainly not the former, which is God’s prerogative,” and “strictly speaking, neither act is easier than the other, since both require divine power...”³⁰ Bock finds that ultimately, “the issue is this: Is Jesus’ claim an empty word or the real thing?”³¹ Yet, how can the question which Bock appropriately asked be answered in light of the epistemological dilemma which Jesus posed in challenging the skeptical religious leaders? Earlier we noted that Marshall was correct in his observation that neither option is strictly easier, but he did qualify his statement, that the latter (“Get up and walk”) “could be regarded as more difficult in the sense that while anybody could declare sin to be forgiven without having to submit his act to some kind of proof it is impossible to claim to heal a person without producing tangible evidence.”³² Here Marshall is affirming what Stein and Bock had observed earlier concerning the difficulty of the “Get up and walk” option. The only way to vindicate that Jesus’ words about the forgiveness of sin (which is theological in nature) were not empty words is to accept the pre-condition which Stein pointed out as being Luke’s understanding, “that if God granted Jesus power to work this miracle, then God himself supported Jesus’ claim that he can forgive sins.”³³ In other words, as Bock phrased it, “One will reveal the truth of the other, as he is about to show.”³⁴ The implication of this counter-question has some significant ramifications for apologetics, especially when one considers the context that Jesus gave the counter-question after being aware of the religious leaders’ reasoning against Him (v. 21-22a), where our phrase above fits into the portion of the text where Jesus addressed the bad reasoning of the religious leaders head-on (v. 22b-24). He could have done miracles without the counter-question to legitimize His claim immediately, but Jesus chose to ask a counter-question to make His skeptics think, to be conscious of their presuppositions and the criteria involved in justifying Jesus’ theological claims. By forcing upon His skeptics the counter-question He posed,

²⁷ Bock, *Luke*, 485.

²⁸ Stein, *Luke*, 177.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 214.

³¹ Bock, *Luke*, 485.

³² Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 214.

³³ Stein, *Luke*, 177.

³⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 485.

Jesus reinforced the evidential value of His miracle by making them aware of the difficulty of the verifiable miraculous claim and its relationship to the theological truth claim He presented. Bock notes that “such a challenge shows that the miraculous character of Jesus’ ministry was not a peripheral matter that could be easily discarded from the early church’s portrait of Jesus. These works had a crucial function against the objector in substantiating Jesus’ claims.”³⁵ How Jesus presented his evidence shows that there is biblical precedence in the method presented in this paper: Jesus in this encounter with His hearers asked questions to make them slow down and consider their presuppositions (philosophy of what is and is not possible), to make them think what the evidence would prove and to use evidence ultimately in a polemical fashion by refuting those who did not believe in Him, thus confirming His claims of the Supernatural.

CONCLUSION

This essay is intended to be a brief overview of a proposal on the occasion and method of presenting evidence within a Van Tillian framework, but has also considered some related issues such as whether Cornelius Van Til is against evidence, and the state of presuppositionalism in the areas of presenting evidence. The proposal has focused on three distinctives of presuppositionalism, and how they play out in the practical giving of evidence. Brief exegetical observations of Luke 5:23 were given to show the precedence of the proposal as found in the teaching and miracle ministry of Jesus. In the near future, there need to be more studies in the methodology of how Jesus debated unbelief, specifically when Jesus presented counter-questions and miracles. Other doctrines of presuppositionalism and their implications for the actual application of delivering evidences might be explored, though I believe the significant doctrines which have bearing in the presentation of evidence have been covered in this proposal.

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³⁵ Ibid.

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