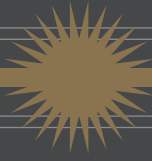


K. SCOTT OLIPHINT

Foreword by William Edgar



COVENANTAL
APOLOGETICS

*Principles & Practice
in Defense of Our Faith*



“A major undertaking in Christian apologetics, this volume makes a most timely and welcome contribution. By labeling the apologetic task ‘covenantal,’ Scott Oliphint highlights throughout that the presuppositions of ‘presuppositional apologetics’ are the clear and indubitable teachings of Scripture and have nothing to do with the postmodern understanding of presuppositions as little more than the personal commitments, inevitably relativizing, of the individual apologist. Comprehensive in its scope, this balanced mix of principles and practice provides valuable instruction to a broad range of readers. I commend it most highly.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“In a day marked by shallow thinking, weak reasoning, and arguments lacking in both theological and biblical depth, Oliphint offers an arsenal of apologetic insight. His affirmation and exposition of a covenantal apologetic brings a vital biblical and theological dimension to the apologetic task. Believers seeking to give an answer for their hope will enthusiastically receive this book.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“K. Scott Oliphint has done us a service in wonderfully translating the venerable Van Tillian apologetic approach into more accessible categories for the practice of apologetics in the contemporary world. Grounded in Scripture and Reformed theology, upholding the lordship of Christ in all of life, eschewing neutrality in our thinking, and tackling the hard cases of the problem of evil, naturalistic evolution, and Islam, Oliphint teaches us how to defend Christianity in a biblically faithful and persuasive manner. I highly recommend this work.”

Stephen J. Wellum, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Whatever your view and practice of defending your faith, *Covenantal Apologetics* will both motivate and equip you for the task in a way that is persuasive, winsome, clearly structured, thoroughly biblical, and most importantly, Christ-exalting. Dr. Oliphint roots us in the unequivocal authority of God’s existence and his self-revelation, and brings principles down to earth by providing potential conversations with a humanist, an atheist, an evolutionist, and a Muslim. If you want to grow in your confidence in Scripture, your evangelistic fruitfulness, and your love for the Savior, read this book.”

Bob Kauffman, Director of Worship, Sovereign Grace Ministries

“Engaging unbelief is the work of every believer in a post-Christian culture. In everyday conversations pluralism demands that we give equal value to all religious beliefs. To stabilize us in this culture, we turn to God’s revelation in Scripture. Drawing from his own experience and offering concrete dialogues, apologist Scott Oliphint models a Christian response to unbelief and has delivered the type of book we desperately need—biblically grounded, God-centered, jargon-pruned, and clearly written. *Covenantal Apologetics* is an essential tool to meet unbelief with the hope of the gospel.”

Tony Reinke, Content Strategist, Desiring God Ministries

“With seismic changes in our society’s perception of life—and especially of human rights—the need for Christians to give reasons for their faith is even greater today. Scott Oliphint comes to our aid by bringing what is often food that only giraffes can eat (the field technically called apologetics) right down to the grasp of Christ’s lambs. Here is a book that will enable you to argue intelligently from Scripture, in the midst of a plethora of false philosophies and religions, as to why the world needs Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.”

Conrad Mbeve, Senior Pastor, Kabwata Baptist Church, Zambia, Africa

Covenantal Apologetics places the defense of the Christian faith where it belongs—in a rich texture of appropriate contexts: the self-revelation of the triune God in the Bible and his created universe, the covenantal relationship of all people (rebellious and redeemed) with their personal Creator, the evangelistic mission of the church, the persuasive power of character and humility, and the give-and-take of interpersonal relationships and conversations. Instead of offering formulaic arguments to win debating points, Oliphint urges Christians to bring a full-orbed theology as we winsomely and forthrightly engage proponents of unbelief and other beliefs. Especially helpful are the sample dialogues with spokespersons for humanism, atheism, and Islam.”

Dennis E. Johnson, Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California

“Few people have thought as deeply and carefully as Scott Oliphint about the relationship between confessional Reformed theology and Christian apologetics. There has been much talk in recent years about ‘covenantal apologetics,’ but it has consisted mainly of informal discussions scattered across the blogosphere. What has been sorely needed is a definitive book-length exposition by a well-regarded scholarly advocate. No one is better qualified than Dr. Oliphint to take on that task, and he has not disappointed. This book clearly explains the theological foundations of covenantal apologetics and illustrates its application in real-world conversations.”

James Anderson, Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte

“Oliphint’s refreshingly Christ-centered approach to persuasively engaging unbelievers with the truth of God equips readers not merely for an intellectual contest of demolishing arguments, but also for a spiritual battle against the suppression of truth in the human heart.”

Nancy Guthrie, author, *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* series

“I am grateful to see Oliphint taking Reformed apologetics in a more accessible, less technical, and richly biblical-theological direction. His approach is uniquely centered on God’s revelation in Christ and emphasizes persuasion aimed at the heart over argumentation targeting the head alone. The book goes beyond merely discussing principles to presenting thorough case studies demonstrating how covenantal apologetics can be put into practice. As a professor and pastor, I will recommend this to many people and assign it in my apologetics courses.”

Justin Holcomb, Executive Director, The Resurgence

“Scripturally based, historically informed, theologically astute, and contemporarily relevant, *Covenantal Apologetics* equips one intellectually and spiritually.”

Adriaan Neele, Director, The Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University

“Dr. Oliphint elegantly displays the theological consistency of covenantal apologetics while demonstrating the practical usefulness of this method in addressing a variety of contemporary challenges to Christian faith. Perhaps most importantly, this book provides sturdy motivation for engaging nonbelievers, directing us to place our confidence not in our own apologetic prowess, but in the gospel’s power, Scripture’s authority, and the Holy Spirit’s activity.”

Jeff Purswell, Dean, Sovereign Grace Ministries Pastors College

“I appreciate the way Oliphint deals with the necessity of the lordship of Christ. He is Lord of all, which means that while truth is not relative, as God’s truth it has relational implications and applications. Oliphint’s emphasis regarding covenantal

apologetics standing on the truth of Christ's lordship is critical to the task, especially in our postmodern culture."

Charles Dunahoo, Former Coordinator, Presbyterian Church in America
Christian Education and Publications

"As a teacher I have been crying out for an apologetics primer that would help to demystify a presuppositional method, demonstrate the exegetical and biblical-theological basis for this method, and give some idea as to what this might look like in the real world with real people. Oliphint's *Covenantal Apologetics* fills this need. It is not only principled and practical, but also pastoral."

Daniel Strange, Academic Vice Principal and Tutor in Apologetics,
Oak Hill College, London

"*Covenantal Apologetics* is carefully written with close attention to detail. It is clear, compelling, and cogent. I recommend it to every careful student of this important subject."

Douglas Wilson, Senior Fellow of Theology, New St. Andrews College

"Every pastor and preacher is a persuader, and this book provides not only the theological rationale but also practical help in that task of persuasion. Those who are committed to a gospel-centered ministry will be both inspired and instructed by Scott Oliphint's insights. Ministries will be strengthened and made more effective by adopting this biblically based and God-honoring paradigm of covenantal apologetics."

Stafford Carson, Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Portadown,
Northern Ireland

"Too often books on Christian apologetics get lost in a labyrinth of complications. Such is not the case with Scott Oliphint's book. It establishes the biblical basis for apologetics by showing how Scripture and the lordship of Christ are vital for the communication of Christian truth. With its accent on apologetics as covenantal, it is clear, practical, coherent, and persuasive—which is, after all, what one wants when looking for reasons for believing something. Oliphint's approach does not remain in a theoretical comfort zone, but tackles problems of unbelief that confront us every time we access the media. If you have never read a book on apologetics, this is it!"

Paul Wells, Dean, Faculté Jean Calvin, Aix-en-Provence, France

"This book will become known as helpful among students and campus ministries. Oliphint effectively persuades the reader to defend the faith by his clear explanation of the loving covenantal relationship between God and his people, the redemptive work of Jesus, and the encouragement of the Holy Spirit."

Rod Mays, National Coordinator, Reformed University Ministries

"In attempting to put to rest the term 'presuppositional,' Oliphint integrates the best insights from his philosophical expertise in the Westminster Seminary tradition with the best insights from the Westminster Assembly theological tradition. The result: a book for both mind and heart. As a pastor, I welcome books that offer a consistently Reformed approach to a defense of Christianity. This may be the best one yet."

Mark Jones, Senior Minister, Faith Vancouver Presbyterian Church

"What sets this book apart is Oliphint's insistence that the person and work of Jesus Christ take center stage in every apologetic discussion. Following Van Til, he relentlessly rallies us around the banner of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture. Although Oliphint's apologetic approach is theologically and philosophically sophisticated, he makes it understandable and practical for ordinary Christians."

Nathan Sasser, Assistant Director of Academic Affairs, Sovereign Grace
Ministries Pastors College

“Dr. Oliphint has given us a very important presentation of Christian apologetics for our day. His discussions draw heavily from Scripture in ways that are accessible to a wide range of Christian readers. He stands in the stream of presuppositional apologetics, and he makes great strides toward dealing with contemporary challenges to the faith. Followers of Christ who want to reach the lost will find this book invaluable.”

Richard L. Pratt Jr., President, Third Millennium Ministries

“*Covenantal Apologetics* succeeds in proving the biblical-covenantal terms for the framework of an unashamed Reformed apologetic. I heartily recommend it, especially to those seeking a thorough introduction to this vital discipline. Those in or aspiring to pastoral ministry will find help to prepare God’s people for works of service and to provide reasons to a dying generation for our hope in our Savior. Those tasked with teaching in seminaries will find both academic stimulus and exegetical broadening. All of us already persuaded by Van Til will do well to recast our ‘presuppositionalism’ into this readily defensible and covenant-biblical frame.”

Jim Wright, Principal, John Wycliffe Theological College, Johannesburg, South Africa

“Even those who do not embrace Reformed theology or presuppositional apologetics will realize that *Covenantal Apologetics* offers a consistent apologetic approach. It is internally coherent, but also in line with the scriptural message and with Van Til’s heritage. The latter has often been discussed in highly academic terms. This text presents covenantal apologetics in an accessible way to church members, pastors, and others who may not have formal theological training. The book offers precious examples of apologetic practice and is therefore useful to equip every Christian to tackle concrete situations where a defense of the faith is needed. The more academically inclined, however, will enjoy the fact that the principles behind the concrete examples remain clearly visible and solid.”

Renato Coletto, Professor, Philosophy of Science, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

“Here is an important contribution to the literature on Van Til’s application of Reformed theology to the discipline of apologetics. Judicious, well written, and refreshingly accessible, Oliphint’s analysis is a compelling ‘translation’ of an approach to defending the faith that insists, among other things, that because human beings are covenant creatures who live and move and have their being in the world created and providentially sustained by the covenant-keeping God, ‘The only way properly to see yourself, the world, or anything else, is through the spectacles of Scripture.’ Highly recommended.”

Paul Kjoss Helseth, Professor of Christian Thought, Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minnesota

“In a pluralistic world, *Covenantal Apologetics* expertly equips pastors, teachers, parents, and students with a superior biblical and theological framework for defending the faith in the public square. For Christians who seek to have a credible voice at the ‘Areopagus’ of our day, this book will help them to dismantle unbelieving worldviews with razor-sharp precision while honoring God’s redemptive mission. Oliphint reminds readers that any form of Christian apologetics divorced from the Triune God’s covenant realities will send the church on a fool’s errand. *Covenantal Apologetics* is faithful to the Bible, the gospel, and redemptive history. This book should be read widely.”

Anthony B. Bradley, Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics, The King’s College, New York

Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith

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Foreword

WILLIAM EDGAR

Slumber and Awakening

Apologetics, the defense and commendation of a Christian worldview, went into something of a hibernation, if not an eclipse, in the twentieth century. A number of factors contributed to this slumber. Following an age of relative confidence in the capacity of humankind to bring about the kingdom of God, the new century found so many reasons to put such confidence into question. It was a time of unforeseen upheavals and became the bloodiest of all centuries in human history. The tribulations of the First and Second World Wars, economic turmoil, revolutions, dictators, and global threats of hostilities meant doubts about the future even in the realm of theology. Artists such as Picasso or Mondrian depicted a world without any kind of trustworthy transcendent meaning. The strange, troubled Polish émigré to Britain Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) wrote powerfully about his discoveries, in various colonies, of the manifestation of human evil. With some exceptions, the twentieth century was a time of disillusionment and doubt.

Accordingly, theologians such as Karl Barth (1886–1968) simply dismissed apologetics as a weak-kneed concession to natural theology. Rightly critical of the nineteenth-century pretensions claiming to usher in God's kingdom in human ways, Barth went on, though, to argue that apologetics substitutes "human religion" for revelation, robbing the gospel of its inherent power. As he put it in the early parts of his *Church Dogmatics*, if Christianity takes up the weapons of apologetics, "it has renounced its birthright. It has renounced the unique power which it has as the religion of revelation. This power dwells

only in weakness.”¹ Apologetics, for Barth, only robs Jesus Christ of his freedom to make himself known directly. So great was Barth’s influence that many seminaries or graduate schools simply eliminated their departments of apologetics.

Suspensions of apologetics could also be found outside the neoorthodox camp. No less an evangelical figure than Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834–1892), and a number of his successors, thought the discipline a waste of time. “I question whether the defenses of the gospel are not sheer impertinences,” he once said. He declared that if Jesus were not capable of fighting his own battles, then Christianity would be in a bad state indeed. Using the familiar illustration of the lion in a cage, he declared that the best strategy is not to defend the beast, but to let him out. The “prince of preachers” worried that apologetics would simply compromise the authority of the gospel preached.

Similarly, certain exegetes argued that the apostle Paul decided when he came to Corinth “to know nothing among [them] except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) because he had tried apologetics on Mars Hill and failed to achieve any results (Acts 17:16–34). F. F. Bruce comments that some see Paul’s statement to the Corinthians as a “confessed decision . . . as though he realized that his tactics at Athens were unwise.” But Bruce comments that this was likely not the case, since Paul was no novice at Gentile evangelization. Rather, he was simply assessing two different contexts and responding appropriately.² William Ramsey goes so far as to say that Paul was “disappointed and perhaps disillusioned by his experience in Athens. He felt that he had gone at least as far as was right in the way of presenting his doctrine in a form suited to the current philosophy; and the result had been little more than naught.”³

Are these not various cases of throwing out the proverbial baby with the bathwater? Barth’s dialectical theology found little room for celebrating any kind of natural revelation; he feared it could lead to natural theology, wherein nature would be seen as *predisposed* to grace. In his estimation the opposite is the case: nature only resists grace.

¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich (1956; repr., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 333.

²F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 246.

³William Ramsay, *St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1892), 252.

Barth's extreme view finds no warrant in Scripture, which is very insistent on the authority, necessity, sufficiency, and clarity of God's revelation in the creation and in human consciousness, as well as in special revelation. Romans 1:18–23 makes it clear that unbelieving people not only know *about* God and his standards, but also know God himself. Even Barth's fellow neoorthodox colleague Emil Brunner accepted the reality of a consciousness of God in the natural man, although in my view he did not deal fully with the implications of Romans 1:18ff.⁴ Barth's polemical booklet *Nein* replied to Brunner's timid suggestions.⁵

Spurgeon's case is different. Perhaps like Barth he had read only the rationalist apologists of the nineteenth century, to which he rightly reacted. Unlike Barth, however, Spurgeon's theology was not dialectical. Rather, his zeal was to protect the gospel from the overgrowth of philosophical reasoning and preach it in all its "naked simplicity." The problem with that, however, is that it appears to eliminate all media—from the humanity of its carriers, to the requirement for adapting the message to particular audiences and cultures. After all, 1 Peter 3:15 enjoins the believer to respond to interlocutors with *apologia*. Making ourselves "all things to all people" does not necessarily compromise the gospel (1 Cor. 9:22). There really is no naked, simple gospel. It must be spoken in human language and argued carefully. Ironically, there is plenty of argument and apologetics in Spurgeon's sermons. The same might be said of Barth's work as well.

As to the view that Paul was disappointed in Athens and decided apologetics could not accomplish the task, we can find no evidence for any of that in the New Testament. While his time on Mars Hill was only brief, the result was the same as it was when he could stay in a place longer: some mocked, some wanted to hear more, and some joined him and believed (Acts 17:32–34). Besides, telling the Corinthians he would know only Christ and him crucified is a typically Pauline way of making his point. He is hardly telling them that he won't reason anymore and that he'll settle instead for repeating Christ and the cross like a mantra. His arguments for moral purity, for sound

⁴ Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 32.

⁵ For a thoughtful discussion of this very public debate, see Trevor Hart, "A Capacity for Ambiguity: The Barth-Brunner Debate Revisited," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44 (1993): 289–305.

marriage, for eating food from the public market, for order in worship, and for the resurrection of the dead are among the most involved discourses found in the New Testament.

Some apologetics was being done in the twentieth century despite these wet blankets. Roman Catholics remained active in responding to the surrounding culture with a defense of the faith. One thinks of Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) in France, or the remarkable G. K. Chesterton (1874–1936) in Great Britain. We can also think of the neo-Thomists, or the “restorationists,” who produced such fertile thinkers as Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and Étienne Gilson (1884–1978). And there were a number of lay apologists from Great Britain, the most influential being the Anglican C. S. Lewis (1898–1963), specialist in medieval and Renaissance literature, storyteller, and apologist for the gospel.⁶

Neo-Calvinism

Then there was another kind of voice from within Protestantism, one that is represented in the present volume. Stemming from the awakening in the Netherlands (*Het Réveil*) and the so-called neo-Calvinist movement in Holland and then in North America, a special kind of apologetics was born. Unlike some of the awakenings, *Het Réveil* touched a good number of theologians, philosophers, and historians. One of the founding fathers of this inventive approach was Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801–1876). Something of a Renaissance man, Groen was a statesman, historian, and chronicler, and, for a time, secretary to King William I of Holland. He grew to become one of the most articulate opponents of political liberalism. The basis for contemporary liberalism was what he considered to be the spirit of revolution, represented by politicians such as Johan Thorbecke. Much of this spirit was bolstered by the French Revolution, about which he wrote a penetrating analysis.⁷ Following several conservative historians, Groen argued that while the revolutionary spirit in France no doubt stemmed from understandable frustrations, its underlying motive was a revolt

⁶ Many other names could be added, including Hans Urs von Balthasar. For a comprehensive overview of the most important schools, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1999).

⁷ Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer, *Lectures on Unbelief and Revolution*, ed. Harry van Dyke (Toronto: Wedge, 1989).

against God's authority. In this way trends and historical movements could be understood in terms of their profound religious roots.

Such an approach became an inspiration for Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), Groen's collaborator in the work of the Anti-Revolutionary political party (the ARP). Kuyper had grown up in rather "modernist" theological circles and studied in a fairly liberal seminary, the Leiden Divinity School. But his life changed during and just after his doctoral studies. Through a number of circumstances and readings he began to think that God is much more directly involved in human affairs than he had previously thought. Kuyper longed for a deeper piety than he had known. As the Reformed pastor in the small village of Beesd, he encountered a simple peasant girl, Pietronella Baltus, who dared tell him he was not a believer! Instead of scorning her, he listened and eventually gave his life fully to God.

Kuyper became a thoroughly Calvinist theologian. In addition, he was a statesman, a journalist, and the founder of the Free University of Amsterdam. Among his many accomplishments, one of the most important for our purposes is the groundwork he laid for the type of apologetics set forth in the book you are reading. Indeed, in some ways, Kuyper is the father of Reformed apologetics. He believed that the Christian world-and-life view could be compared and contrasted with other, unbelieving worldviews, and that this could be done in all the different disciplines, from science to politics to the arts and beyond. To get a good grasp on his approach, one ought to read his *Lectures on Calvinism*, presented at Princeton University in 1898.⁸ The Christian university he founded was based on the same conviction that one could engage in every kind of study as a Christian believer.

There is considerable irony in attributing to Kuyper such a crucial role in the development of Reformed apologetics, since he regularly condemned apologetics as an obscure endeavor, unable to answer the issues of the day! A number of questions are involved here, which space forbids exploring. At least one reason he saw little benefit in the discipline of apologetics is that his approach to worldview meant opposing massive system to massive system, whereas much apologetics was concerned, it seemed to him, only with narrow polemics and details. There

⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943). This is the best introduction to Kuyper's thought.

were also theological reasons. His sense of the antithesis between belief and unbelief was so great that it left no real room for communication across the barriers. While he strongly believed in common grace, he saw its purpose as, first, to restrain sin and, then, to allow Christians to engage in social and cultural activity, such as labor reforms and furthering the good purposes of science, the arts, and so on.⁹ Common grace was not for Kuyper a basis that allowed bridge building and apologetic persuasion to take place. Here, though unlike Barth, he differed with the majority Reformed tradition. For example, John Calvin believed that Romans 1:18–23 means all human beings possess a *sense of deity* to which the Christian apologist may appeal. Nonetheless, what Reformed apologists have been able to take away from Kuyper, more than his objections to the discipline, is his insight into worldview and the way in which we must oppose the deep principle of belief to the deep principle of unbelief, rather than simply arguing from the details.¹⁰

Presuppositionalism

Here enters Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987). He was born in the Netherlands, but moved with his family to Highland, Indiana, when Cornelius was ten years of age. They were farming people. The Van Tils attended the Munster Christian Reformed Church. Cornelius was educated at Calvin College, then spent a year at Calvin Seminary, followed by Princeton Theological Seminary and finally Princeton University, where he obtained the PhD in 1927, having written his dissertation on “God and the Absolute,” which interacted with Idealist philosophy. After a year in the pastoral ministry he returned to teach at Princeton Seminary in 1928. The next year he left to teach at the newly formed Westminster Theological Seminary, where he labored for more than forty years as professor of apologetics.¹¹

⁹For a thorough study of Kuyper on common grace, see S. U. Zuidema, “Common Grace and Christian Action in Kuyper,” accessed, http://www.reformationalpublishingproject.com/rpp/docs/S_U_Zuidema_on_Kuyper.pdf.

¹⁰For more on Kuyper’s relation to Reformed apologetics, see the introduction to Abraham Kuyper in *Christian Apologetics Past and Present: A Primary Resource Reader*, vol. 2, *From 1500*, ed. William Edgar and K. Scott Oliphint (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 331–35. Kuyper’s sphere of influence was considerable. He is behind the Amsterdam philosophy represented by Herman Dooyeweerd, H. G. Stoker, and D. H. Th. Vollenhoven.

¹¹A first-rate biography of Van Til is John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008). This study covers many aspects of Van Til’s thought, but it also describes him as a churchman through and through.

Building on the great Reformed theologians past and present, including John Calvin, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Benjamin B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, and C. W. Hodge, Van Til began to construct a truly biblical apologetic for the twentieth century. “Apologetics,” as he puts it in several places, “is the vindication of the Christian philosophy of life against the various forms of the non-Christian philosophy of life.”¹² This statement is significant at several levels. Van Til’s project was to take the Christian worldview (“philosophy of life”) and defend it over against unbelief. Notice he describes the “non-Christian philosophy” as coming in various guises. At bottom, though, unbelief is based on the dialectic of rationalism and irrationality at the same time. The term “vindication” should not throw us. It means justification rather than merely exoneration. Such justification takes the form of arguments for the truth of the Christian position that are different from the typical approaches in more traditional apologetics. Van Til said at least two things about the right kind of argument. First, there is no neutrality. You cannot “prove” the gospel simply by appealing to evidence or to some sort of logical demonstration, however sophisticated. Unless you embed evidence and logic in a framework that has authority, you have, in effect, sold the farm. You have not really challenged unbelief. The second thing, however, is that we may indeed build bridges to the unbeliever. Because unbelievers know God and have the sense of deity in them, we can appeal to that consciousness. We do that not by building on their philosophy, since despite having a knowledge of God they suppress the truth (they process it wrongly), as Paul explains in Romans 1:18; instead, we may and must appeal to their conscious knowledge of God and his requirements.

Accordingly, the apologetic procedure set forth by Van Til is to get over onto the ground of the unbeliever for argument’s sake, and then to show how such a position simply cannot square with its own claims. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), for example, affirmed that to be truly authentic, one’s views could not begin with any preset rules. The trouble is, then, how do we know Sartre is truly authentic, free of rules? The requirement to be without rules is a rule! Indeed, Sar-

¹²Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed., ed. William Edgar (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 17. A number of Van Til’s books were originally class syllabi handed to the students for discussion.

tre took moral and political positions, which were most often leftist. When the “iron mask is off,” Van Til says, we can then invite an unbeliever to see how in the Christian worldview you may find meaning and grace to think and to live.

Though Van Til did not use the term much, his approach has become known as *presuppositionalism*. The reason is that unless one presupposes the ontological Trinity (as he often referred to God), then it is impossible to make intelligible predications. Pierre Courthial, the dean of the Reformed Seminary at Aix-en-Provence, in my hearing called Van Til “the most original apologist of our times.” A principal reason for his originality is that he thought about philosophy and apologetics biblically and theologically. This earned him the criticism of some who believed the genres should not be mixed. Yet he insisted that unless one begins from God’s authority, revealed in the world and in the Scriptures, then we will always have an inadequate foundation for our views and our lives.

Van Til directly or indirectly inspired several generations of pastors, theologians, and laypersons. Some of them, like Francis Schaeffer (1912–1984), while not fully absorbing all of his teacher’s views, have had an extraordinary impact on those they instructed. Others adopted certain aspects of Van Til’s thought—say, the antithesis—but without detecting the radically gospel-driven aspect of his teaching. *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in Defense of Our Faith* is written by a man who has not only absorbed what Van Til stood for, but developed and applied it in ways Van Til was unable to do, simply because he was a pioneer more than a consolidator.

Covenantal Apologetics

With the present volume, as with his other writings, K. Scott Oliphint has made a remarkable contribution to apologetics in the Reformed tradition. To begin with, much more than Van Til, who was usually satisfied merely to assume it, Oliphint does a good deal of biblical and theological explication for the reader. There are substantial sections here on the Trinity and the incarnation, as well as on biblical passages such as Acts 17 and many others, with which he substantiates his points. Oliphint, himself a rather original apologist, courageously

puts into question the usefulness of the expression *presuppositional apologetics* and suggests instead that because the project of Van Til and his school was to defend the faith within the larger structure of the relation of the Creator to the creature, a more apt name for this task would be *covenantal apologetics*. Taking his beginning point from the way God condescends to his creatures, Oliphint argues that apologetics should be conducted by reaffirming the way God remains God and yet truly (covenantally) relates to the real world that he has made. And then he shows how our response should be “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”¹³ Accordingly, Oliphint highlights a feature of the *locus classicus* for apologetics, 1 Peter 3:15, not always noticed: its call first to lift up Christ in our hearts.

Oliphint spends considerable time on issues often ignored by typical books on apologetics. For example, he writes extensively of the role of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in our apologetics. This may sound like a no-brainer, except that most books I know, if they mention the Holy Spirit, ask us to choose between pure argument and somehow letting the Spirit do all the work for us. Oliphint explains the numerous roles of the Holy Spirit in apologetics.

Oliphint conducts various specific arguments with considerable depth. Rather than the usual sound-byte responses to skeptics and relativists, he takes on individual philosophers in sometimes imaginative ways. For example, he interacts with skeptics like Richard Dawkins, who got himself into trouble by telling a young woman who had been propositioned in an elevator that her plight was far less serious than that of women living in countries where the law allows female mutilation. Dawkins sensed that there was a difference, but the outraged woman did not, nor could she get him to show why there was. In fact, Dawkins’s skeptical philosophy cannot produce a reason.

Oliphint addresses a number of problem areas that any apologist must address, and he does it by using the foundational theological principles that ought always to be at work in our arguments. This does not mean he simply quotes scriptural prooftexts so as to gag the interlocutor. Oliphint’s primary training outside of theology is in philosophy. Thus, he addresses the problem of evil as it is often discussed

¹³From the hymn by Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling,” 1747.

by philosophers. He thoughtfully interacts with Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom, and Evil*. He looks into the relation of science to the Bible. He has important thoughts on Islam. Yet, instead of trying to cover every possible issue, he explains that a covenantal apologetic is not an encyclopedia of answers but a wise approach to the art of persuasion.

The word *practice* is part of the subtitle. In view of that, Oliphint has made every attempt to show how all of this works. That is, again, something less present in Van Til's corpus, but a badly needed extension. We are given here ten principles that should guide our practice in various conversations. He discusses the use of legitimate *ad hominem* arguments. Indeed, Oliphint gives us a number of sample dialogs between believers and unbelievers.

Not everything in this book is easy. Certain parts of it will require concentration. Yet, no one could miss the general flow. Altogether, this book is timely and full of encouragement. It accomplishes what it commends: persuasion. If my hunch is right, this book represents the next step and an assured future for the movement that began so long ago in Holland.

Introduction

All Divine Religion (say the Atheists) is nothing else than a human invention, artificially excogitated to keep man in awe; and the Scriptures are but the device of man's brain, to give assistance to Magistrates in Civil Government. This objection strikes at the root and heart of all Religion & opposeth two main principles at once: (1) that there is a God; (2) that the Scripture is the word of God.¹

A few years ago I was involved in a conference overseas. The theme was the relationship of faith and reason. Most of the presenters were academicians and professors who came from an Eastern background. They were intensely curious about the various ways that the Western tradition thought about the relationship of faith and reason.

The paper I presented included a critique of Immanuel Kant's view of faith and knowledge, but it also included an argument for a theory of knowledge that had God's revelation as its ultimate ground. In the course of that presentation and discussion, I also wanted to make it clear to the other presenters that what I was urging was not simply a change of mind, although that was necessary. What I was urging was a total transformation that could be had only by way of faith in Christ. So I moved from a critique of Immanuel Kant to the *true* Immanuel, the Lord Jesus Christ.²

During the discussion immediately after my presentation, one of the other presenters was particularly agitated. It seemed obvious to him that all I was saying with respect to the relationship of faith to reason was that such a relationship could not be truly understood unless

¹Edward Leigh, *Treatise on Divinity* (1646), 2.1, quoted in Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 3, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 192.

²The full text of this presentation can be found in K. Scott Oliphint, "Using Reason by Faith," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73, no. 1 (2011): 97–112.

one accepted the Bible as true. He went on to ask me just why he or anyone else should accept the Bible as an authority. He was perplexed that I seemed to be arguing in a circle.

I admitted to him that I certainly was arguing in (some kind of) a circle. I was arguing that unless one accepts the Bible for what it says and what it is, there would be no real solution to the faith-and-reason problem. Then I made clear to the other presenters that they were all asking that their own views, based on their own reasoning and sources, be accepted as true. In every case, I said, every other presenter appealed to his own final authority. “So,” I asked, “on what basis should I accept your circle over mine?”

At that point there was an awkwardly long silence, after which one of the presenters said, “Maybe we should look again at the way Buddhism views these issues.” In other words, the only response to my query was to deflect it and to suggest perhaps that a more mystical approach would be a better way to think about these things.

That evening some of us at the conference took a riverboat tour after dinner. Two of the attendees at the conference were eager to discuss my presentation. They were adherents of Kant’s view, and they wanted to hear more about why I thought his view was so deficient. That more-than-three-hour conversation provided a wonderful opportunity to further discuss the reality and necessity of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and all that it entails, if one is interested in thinking properly about philosophy, or about anything else. The entire day, and into the evening, was one long apologetic discussion. I was attempting to defend the truth and faith of Christianity.

A number of presenters at this conference argued for some kind of generic theism. Their arguments were less than controversial. All they were saying, in effect, was that there might be a proper way to think about the possibility that a god could exist. Responses to these arguments mirrored the manner in which they were given—cool, pensive, and abstract. There was nothing in those kinds of arguments that required anything more than a response of, “Hmmm, perhaps,” in contrast to an all-day discussion.

The approach I took at that conference is the approach that will be developed in these pages. The beauty of this approach—and what

sets it off from any other apologetic method—is that it is naturally and centrally focused on the reality of God’s revelation in Christ, including, of course, the good news of the gospel.

What was so distinctive about the argument I gave at that conference was that it called for a radical commitment, a commitment that included a change of mind and heart, a commitment every bit as religious as the context in which these presenters had been reared.

That kind of argument could never settle for a response of, “Perhaps,” but was more conducive either to passionate objections or utter surrender. No abstract response would do in this case. The only way to think properly about faith and reason, I was arguing, is to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). No other way can provide what my fellow presenters were hoping for.

That conference was an academic one, so it needed an academic presentation. But the approach that I was employing at the conference fits just as comfortably in a more normal setting. What I hope to accomplish in this book is to set out (what has been called) a presuppositional approach to apologetics. As will become clear, however, I hope to do that in a way that is relatively free of technical vocabulary. You will rarely see the word *presupposition*. Not only so, but I will suggest another label for this approach; I will try to make the case for retiring the label *presuppositional* and adopting the label *covenantal*. The reasons for this will be laid out in chapter 1.

This book seeks to do a number of things. It is an attempt to move past a somewhat common *description* of apologetics and apply a new label. In applying a new label, it will argue why that label, and the content included in it, is more apt for the method advocated here.

We are also attempting to move discussions about a “presuppositional” approach to apologetics past simply laying out the *principles* that must be included in it. Those principles are important. As a matter of fact, they are central and crucial to the approach itself. But in my experience, many students of apologetics are growing weary of an almost interminable discussion of principles only. This is understandable. An apologetic that can do little more than continually talk about itself is not worth the effort exerted or ink spilled over it. An apologetic that leaves us in the dark as to exactly *how* it might be practiced will not

encourage the saints and will be of little use to the cause of Christ in the face of opposition.

So this book is not meant to be, technically speaking, another “introduction.” My publisher tells me that the word *Introduction* in a book title is so broad these days that it says very little about the contents of a book. Rather, this book is meant to be a basic translation. To translate means, literally, to “carry across.” There are two aspects of translation that I hope to accomplish in this book. First, translations usually refer to a “carrying across” from one language to another, for example, from Greek to English, in the case of the New Testament. What this book will do is translate the language, concepts, and ideas set forth in Van Til’s Reformed apologetic into language, terms, and concepts that are more accessible. Second, translations have to do with “carrying across” the meanings of words, phrases, and so forth. I hope to translate much of what is *meant* in Van Til’s own writings from their often philosophical and technical contexts to a more basic biblical and theological context. Part of that translation of meaning will include dialogs designed to show what it means, for example, when a defense of Christianity focuses on an opponent’s presuppositions.

As with any translation, there will, nevertheless, be some differences from the original. The differences will not be substantial. That is, they will not (as far as I know) change or negate any of Van Til’s central concerns. The differences, rather, will be of language and of style. While, for the most part, avoiding technical terminology, I will explain methodology by using some of the basic categories given to us in Scripture and in the Reformed theology that flows from Scripture. In that way, I hope that the discussion and development in this book will take a Reformed apologetic and move it forward.

Because my approach has its roots in biblical and theological truth, I will begin, in chapter 1, with some of the basic biblical content that informs that approach. Chapter 2 will then explain how that content applies specifically to the activity and discipline of apologetics. Chapters 3 and 4 lay out the methodological impetus behind a covenantal approach. I will argue that, given its theological roots, covenantal apologetics is better seen as the art of persuasion than as the science of demonstration.

Chapter 5 will attempt to show how (what is sometimes called) the

“Achilles’ heel” of Christianity—the problem of evil—can be adequately and biblically addressed in a way that moves, naturally and inexorably, to the good news of the gospel. Chapters 6 and 7 are, in the main, expositions, with example dialogs, of what it means for us to do apologetics in a way that requires that we “walk in wisdom toward outsiders.” The “outsiders” in chapter 6 will be those who hold to naturalistic evolution. In chapter 7, the “outsider” will be a convert to Islam.

The “movement” of the book will progress from the simple to the more complex. Each chapter is designed, in its own way, to build on the ones before it. So it just may be that the latter chapters will introduce ideas and concepts not yet familiar to some.

In the discipline of apologetics, however, there is a constant need for thoughtful, meditative practice. Such practice itself may be new to many. However, I am confident that the more complex material will become more and more obvious and familiar as readers give it more and more thought and meditation. In most everything that I say in the dialogs, all that is needed is a thoughtful commitment to the truths given to us in Scripture, and then the practice of probing the assumptions and foundations of any opposing position will come more readily.

In all of these chapters, there is a dual goal. I am attempting to explain the focus of our approach and then, through sample dialogs, show the approach “in action.” My hope is that this combination of “principles and practice” will move readers significantly forward in their interest in and practice of a defense of Christianity.

This, then, is the bottom-line truth that must be central in everything we discuss: Christianity is true, so anything opposing it is false. This means that whatever opposition to Christianity we face, it is by definition an opposition that is false. Even if we have no idea what the central tenets or teachings are in such opposition, we know at the outset that it cannot sustain itself in God’s world. The rest of this book is an attempt to explain the implications of that central truth.

One more note must be mentioned. As stated above, the approach that will be set out in this book is one that reached its halcyon days during the career of Cornelius Van Til. I have read virtually all of the significant criticisms of Van Til’s approach and am well aware of the problems that some see. However, none of those criticisms is convincing

enough to provoke a change in Van Til's basic approach. Whatever the critiques, Van Til's application of Reformed theology to the discipline of apologetics is obvious in everything he wrote; any advance on his discussion must reckon, first, with the theological roots of his approach.³

I am convinced that much more *biblical and theological* discussion is needed with respect to this approach. So much of the material related to this method is mired in deep and complex philosophical concepts and verbiage that it has remained, by and large, inaccessible to any who are not interested or schooled in such things. The change of terms and labels in this book is, therefore, not meant to be mere window dressing. It is meant to begin to alter discussions of how we understand and do apologetics. I remain convinced that if one embraces the theology that came out of the Reformation era, then this approach to apologetics is the only consistent option available. Discussions about that, then, ought to begin with the possibility of *theological* disagreements, and not with mere differences in *philosophy* or in philosophical jargon.

Though this book is a translation, it is not meant to eclipse its original source. Any who are interested in moving on—theologically and apologetically—after reading this book, should begin to collect the volumes listed at the end of chapter 1, for a start, and to work through those in light of the material presented here.

I am confident that no other method so naturally and clearly sets forth a defense of the *Christian* faith as this one does. The application of this approach is the best apologetic means to bring glory to God; it encourages others to know and understand that glory, as they see it in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).



Sure I must fight if I would reign;
 Increase my courage, Lord.
 I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
 Supported by Thy Word.⁴

³For an excellent picture of Van Til's career, including the central focus of his theology on his work in apologetics, see John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

⁴Isaac Watts, "Am I a Soldier of the Cross," 1724.

Always Ready

Reformed theology, as worked out by Calvin and his recent exponents such as Hodge, Warfield, Kuyper, and Bavinck, holds that man's mind is derivative. As such it is naturally in contact with God's revelation. It is surrounded by nothing but revelation. It is itself inherently revelational. It cannot naturally be conscious of itself without being conscious of its creatureliness. For man self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness. Calvin speaks of this as man's inescapable sense of deity.¹

Christian apologetics is the application of biblical truth to unbelief. It's really no more complicated than that. But it is complicated by the fact that there are so many theological permutations of biblical truth and almost no end to the variations and contours of unbelief. Not only so, but there have been, are, and will continue to be attacks of every sort that seek to destroy the truth of the Christian faith. So as one thinks about and commences to defend the Christian faith, things can become complex.

What we hope to accomplish in this book is more modest than some might wish. We will not seek to knock down every argument, or even every main argument, that has been brought against Christianity. Nor will we seek to lay out every *way* such attacks and objections have been or can be addressed. Normally, there are various ways to respond to objections that come our way. Rather, what we will set out to do, first of all, is to lay out the primary biblical and theological principles that must be a part of any covenantal defense of Christianity and then

¹Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 114.

to demonstrate how these principles might be applied against certain objections.

Therefore, the intent of this book is to be both principial (foundational) and practical. The principles can be seen as the fence outside of which one should not go, and the actual responses to objections can be seen as specific paths within the fence line. No doubt there are other paths as well, so there will usually be other ways one might approach objections that are proffered against Christianity.

The fact is, there is no one way or even five ways properly to address objections against Christianity. There are as many ways as there are people with objections. What you might say to one person could be very different from what you might say to another, even if their basic objections are identical. But in each and every case, what must be understood are the fundamental biblical and theological tenets or principles that guide, direct, and apply to whatever attacks, objections, and questions may come to the Christian. With those principles in place, a proper, covenantal defense of Christianity can be pursued. So we must stay within the fence line (i.e., the principles), but we have ample room to move inside its borders.

The biblical and theological principles that will be laid out below belong, historically, to the theology that gained its greatest clarity during the time of the Reformation. Thus, the principles will have a certain specificity to them that may not be the case, for example, in a more general evangelical context. Our entire discussion will assume that Reformed theology is the best and most consistent expression of the Christian faith.² First, however, to ensure that we are all on the same page, some basic truths about Christianity and apologetics will be broached here and will come up later as we proceed.

Christian Truth

The true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—created the heavens and the earth, and he created them good. There were no flaws in God’s creation. Because it was all the work of his perfect hands, it was all very good. But then creation changed, because we changed it.

The entrance of sin in the world was also the initiation of a cos-

²For a summary of Reformed theology, see, for example, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

mic war. Scripture gives us no details as to why the serpent decided to tempt our first parents. Perhaps there was a Job-like scene in the heavenlies, where Satan asked for permission to attack Adam and Eve. Or perhaps it was just a natural part of the Devil's now-fallen nature.

Whatever the reason, the temptation of Adam and Eve was an attack on their right relationship with God. And the attack was successful. Eve was utterly deceived (2 Cor. 11:3), ate the forbidden fruit, and convinced Adam to do the same, and all of creation fell.

It would have been perfectly acceptable and expected if God had determined at that point to do away with creation altogether. Because the fall of creation was ruinous to its original status as "very good," and because the reality of sin in the world was despicable to a holy God, he could have simply determined to eliminate the universe, setting things back to where they were prior to his creative activity. God could have continued happily and eternally to exist without creation and all of its now-sinful aspects.

But this was not to be; it was not a part of God's eternal plan, a plan he freely decided to initiate. Instead, the Lord determined freely to condescend and extend his grace. He came down to the garden. But this time, he did not come down to have fellowship with Adam and Eve. Rather, he came down as their Judge and as their only hope. Not only so, but he came down to judge Satan as well for what he had done in Paradise.

The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:14–15)

It may be that the full impact of these horrendous words escapes us. We should remember that prior to this event everything was just as it should be. God had created a place and people in that place, all of which were there to bring him glory and to work in relationship to and with him.

But after the fall he said, "I will put enmity between you and the

woman, and between your offspring and her offspring.” This is horrible news. This marks the beginning of a radical and all-encompassing war. From this time forward, no one is excluded from this war; no one is left out. Prior to Adam’s sin, Adam and Eve worked toward the one goal of bringing glory to the God who had made all things. Now there are two goals, not one. There are two cosmic powers working in creation. The power of God and his plan are now battling against the power of Satan and his legion. These powers are not at all equal; one depends upon the other. Anything Satan does, he does only because the Lord sustains him. So the battle is not among equals. Even so, the battle rages on until the close of history.

In this light, and basic to everything else that we will say, we should recognize that every person on the face of the earth is defined, in part, by his relationship to a covenant head. That is, there are two, and only two, positions that are possible for humanity, and only one of which can be actual for each person at a given time. A person is either, by nature (after the fall into sin), *in Adam*, in which case he is opposed to and in rebellion against God, or he is *in Christ*, in which case by grace a person is not guilty before God but is an heir of eternal life. This is the covenantal status of humanity, and it assumes, in each case, a relationship to God. It assumes as well the ongoing battle against evil in which God is making his enemies a footstool for Christ’s feet.

But why didn’t God, when sin entered the world, simply squash Satan and his legion and finish the battle? Why does he put up with, even actively join the fight against, such rebellion when he could stop it at any time? The only answer we have to such questions is that all things are still working to and for his own glory, even though sin has ruined his creation (Rom. 11:36). Everything that happens, happens according to his all-wise and perfect plan.

But we shouldn’t minimize the fact that he is actively fighting. Though he has the power to finish it all, the Lord continues to wage war against the powers in the heavenlies. Not only so, but those who are in Christ have the privilege and responsibility to fight with him (Eph. 6:10–18). Included in that fight is the activity of defending the faith (a faith, we should remember, that we have been graciously

given—cf. Eph. 2:8; 1 Pet. 3:15; Jude 3). This is the task of apologetics; it is the task of defending and commending the truth of Christianity.

Required to Respond

We should pause here for a moment to consider our place in God's cosmic battle. A non-Christian friend of mine recently returned from a trip overseas. When I asked him how his trip was, he looked me in the eye and, with finger pointing and shaking in my face, steadfastly declared, "There is no God." That was the first thing he wanted me to know. He knew I was a Christian, and he was anxious to give me one more reason why he was not. He reasoned that if there were a God, the places that he had seen on his trip would not be in the wretched and Augean conditions that he saw. For him, the suffering he witnessed was so overwhelming that it was a sure indication God could not exist. My response was very simple, and it stopped the conversation (at least for a while). I simply said to him, "What makes you think that God is responsible for such things?" That question was in itself a kind of defense; it was calculated to make my friend think of the destructive power of sin.

The first epistle of Peter is written to a group of suffering Christians. These are Christians who have been "grieved by various trials" (1:6), who are in exile (1:17), and who thus are living in places foreign to them. They are encouraged not to be surprised when fiery trials come upon them (4:12)—not *if* fiery trials come, but *when* they do. The Christian perspective on suffering is in diametrical opposition to my friend's. This is not surprising. There is an antithesis between Christian and non-Christian; as we said, one is either in Christ or in Adam. That antithesis is not merely theoretical. It applies to the way we think, the way we act, and the way we view the world. In the midst of his readers' suffering, Peter gives this command: "Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Pet. 3:15, NASB).

The command is to "sanctify Christ as Lord." In the previous verse, Peter refers to Isaiah 8:12–13, which includes a command to regard Yahweh as holy. Peter attributes the prerogatives of Yahweh to Jesus

Christ here. The New Testament application of Isaiah 8:12–13 is that Christians, in the midst of their suffering, are to set apart, remember, and recognize in their hearts that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Instead of looking at the overwhelming suffering around them and declaring that there is no God, they are rather to declare, “Jesus is Lord.” They are to “sanctify” or “set apart” the lordship of Christ in their hearts by showing his lordship when suffering comes. Peter then goes on to tell them (and us) that the command to set Christ apart as Lord is fulfilled as we ready ourselves for a defense of what we believe. Peter is telling us here that, when objections and attacks come our way, we are required to respond to them.

If we are honest with ourselves, our mind-set may often be more in sync with my friend’s than with Scripture. It may be that, when suffering comes, or when it threatens to overwhelm us in some way, we think that belief in God seems foolish. How could God allow such a thing to happen? Why wouldn’t he prevent this?

Perhaps the most significant point of Peter’s command is the reason he gives for it. It is as simple as it is profound: “For Christ also died for sins once for all” (3:18, NASB). The ironic twist, one that points us to the transposition of the gospel, is not that when we see suffering, we should conclude there is no God. Rather, it is that when we see suffering, we should remember that God himself, in the person of his Son, did exactly that so that suffering and sin would one day cease. Suffering is clear evidence that Christ is Lord; it is not a testimony against that truth. The suffering that is the cross of Christ—the very thing that, on the face of it, might lead us to believe there is no God—is, as a matter of fact, the deepest expression of his sovereign character as Lord.

It is the clear and steadfast conviction that Christ, and Christ alone, is Lord that has to motivate our Christian defense. Peter’s point is clear. In commanding us to set Christ apart as Lord, Peter is not talking about whether one has received Christ as Savior, or as Savior and Lord—not at all. Peter’s point is that, if one is to be adequately prepared to give an answer for one’s Christian faith, the lordship of Christ must be a solid and unwavering commitment of one’s heart.

But why? Again, the answer is as simple as it is profound: because that is what he is! The specific command that Peter gives can be stated

more generally. We are to think about and live in the world according to what it really is, not according to how it might at times *appear* to us. As Peter writes to persecuted and scattered Christians, he recognizes that one of their paramount temptations is to interpret their circumstances in such a way that would not acknowledge Christ as Lord. In the midst of their persecution and suffering, it may begin to look like someone else is in charge. After all, if Christ were Lord, how could these things be happening?

As a matter of fact, the lordship of Christ explains why these things are happening. The lordship of Christ is the conclusion to, the end result of, his own suffering and humiliation. It is *because* he was obedient, even to death on a cross, that he has been given the name that is above every name. It is *because* he suffered that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord. The road to his exaltation was paved with blood, sweat, and tears. If we are to be exalted with him on that last day, ours will be so paved as well.

With all of the attendant mysteries surrounding the suffering of Job, two words from God himself—“my servant” (Job 1:8; 2:3)—initiate our understanding of what Job was called to endure. As Job was called to be a suffering servant, Christ was the quintessential Suffering Servant (Isaiah 53). Those who know that their Redeemer lives (Job 19:25), who are called to be united to him, will be suffering servants with him as well.

The lordship of Christ is basic to our defense of Christianity. Christ now reigns. He is Lord. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him. That authority is the prerequisite to the command to make disciples. Without that authority, baptism and disciple making in and for the church are meaningless. All things have been placed under his feet, and Christ has been given “as head over all things to the church” (Eph. 1:22). The process of history is the process of making Christ’s enemies a footstool for his feet. That footstool is being built because he is Lord. Just like Jesus’s earthly father, his heavenly Father is a carpenter. He is building a footstool for his Son (see, for example, Acts 2:35; Heb. 1:13; 10:13).

So wherever you go, to whomever you speak, Christ is Lord there, and he is Lord over that person. Since he is Lord, his truth is truth

in every place and for every person. All persons are in a covenant relationship with Christ the Lord. They owe him obedience. The same Christ who rules over you, rules over those who oppose him. The fact that someone has not set Christ apart as Lord in his heart in no way detracts from or undermines the central point that he is Lord over all. At least two implications of this truth are important to remember.

The first is that truth is not relative. Most Christians agree with that point, even if they don't quite understand it. I remember years ago reading Allan Bloom's best seller *The Closing of the American Mind*. Bloom began that book by noting what was patently obvious then (and what is even more pronounced today). He said that there was one cardinal affirmation that every college student believed: "Truth is relative." He went on to say that it was such a part of the fabric of our culture and our way of thinking that it was thought to need no argument; and to demand an argument would be to misunderstand the status of that truth. The bedrock conviction that truth is relative, Bloom asserted, was as ingrained in the American psyche as baseball and apple pie; it was the air that we breathed. "Truth is relative"—ironically, that proposition alone seemed to be universally affirmed and thus *not* relative.

The sinful power of self-deception cannot be underestimated in this regard. The power of sin in us makes us adept anosognosiacs (people unaware of, or denying, our own disease). In our sins, we have an uncanny ability to fashion a world that has all the substance of an ethereal fog. If anything is patently obvious, it is that truth cannot be relative. The notion itself betrays a decided lack of self-awareness and a stubborn blindness to the big picture. At the micro and the macro levels, we live and move and have our being in the God who alone is truth. Anyone who wants to argue that truth is relative betrays, by that argument, that it cannot be. Anyone who wants to hold that truth is relative, but pretends apathy about the matter and thus eschews argument, is like David Hume,³ who played backgammon even though he knew that such an act annihilated his own philosophy. So the relativistic worldview that we think is real turns out to be a sleight of hand, a magician's illusion.

³David Hume (1711–1776) was the most famous and radical exponent of the empiricist school of philosophy. I'll say more on Hume later.

The point for the Christian, however, and the point to stand on in a covenantal apologetic, is that Christ's lordship—which includes not only that he now reigns, but also that he has spoken and that all owe him allegiance—is true for anyone and everyone. Christ is Lord even over his enemies, and ours. And part of what this means is that the authority of Scripture, which is the verbal expression of Christ's lordship, is authoritative even over those who reject it.

The Bible is authoritative not because we accept it as such, but because it is the word of the risen Lord. It has a claim on all people. Its truth is the truth for every person in every place. Why, then, would we be reluctant to communicate that truth in our apologetics? Perhaps because we have not reckoned with the actual lordship of Christ. Perhaps we haven't really set him apart as Lord in our hearts.

The second implication, which we have already raised, is that we must base our defense of Christianity on reality, and reality is what God says it is. What we dare not do in a covenantal apologetic is let the enemy choose the weapon. Any enemy worth his salt will choose a weapon that fires in only one direction. But we are called to use the weapons that the Lord himself has given us. "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). The weapons of our warfare are divine weapons, and they have their focus in the sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17).

Why choose these weapons? Because they are *God's* weapons, given to us by God so that we can "destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5). In other words, they are the real and true weapons that God has given to us to fight the good fight. They are the weapons through which God is building his Son's footstool. And they are the weapons that alone have the power to subdue the enemy.

There is more to be said on these points, and more will be said later. But the basic principle is this: a covenantal apologetic must proceed on the basis of reality and not on the basis of illusion. We must proceed according to what Christ, who is the Lord, has told us, not according to what our opponents have decided is "appropriate" for a defense of Christianity. We view our apologetic and we proceed in it, as in the rest of life, through the corrective lenses of Holy Scripture.

Anything less would be like choosing to walk in a fog in order to see more clearly.

What Is Covenantal Apologetics?

As we saw in 1 Peter 3:15, apologetics is a biblical and theological notion taken directly from Scripture. In that way, *apologetics* is a term much like other biblical words such as *justification* or *sanctification*. The difference with apologetics, however, is that it necessarily deals with a relationship between Christian faith and unbelief that is not the focal point of most other biblical notions. Many, if not most, of our Christian doctrines relate specifically to what we as Christians believe. Not so with the notion of apologetics.

So, for example, if one wanted to be an expert on the biblical teaching of justification, one would concentrate on texts that deal specifically with that teaching. The doctrine of justification is a doctrine for the church; it is Scripture's teaching on how we can be declared not guilty before God. It relates directly to the Christian and his relationship with God. In order to think carefully about apologetics, we begin with Scripture as well. But we pursue Scripture in such a way that we have at the forefront of our minds how biblical doctrines—especially the doctrines of God, Christ, sin, and salvation—relate to what Scripture says about unbelief. In other words, the concern of apologetics is biblically to answer challenges that come to Christianity from unbelief.

What I hope to show throughout this book is that apologetics must (1) be *Christian* and (2) have a *theological* foundation. If these two things are integral to Christian apologetics, then it might be best to give it a proper label. Though the approach I advocate is a version of what some have called presuppositionalism, that label as an approach to apologetics needs once and for all to be laid to rest. It has served its purpose well, but it is no longer descriptively useful, and it offers, now, more confusion than clarity when the subject of apologetics arises.

There are various reasons for this confusion. For one, there are a variety of ways to understand the notion of presupposition, as well as a variety of presuppositionalists whose approaches differ significantly. Francis Schaeffer, Gordon Clark, and E. J. Carnell, just to mention three, were all concerned with presuppositions in their apologetic

argumentation. Their respective approaches, however, differ in ways that relate to their use and understanding of biblical truth.

Moreover, there is also the post-Kuhnian⁴ predicament in which we find ourselves, such that paradigms and presuppositions have come to be equated, and have come into their own, in a way that would serve to destroy Christianity in general, and Christian apologetics in particular. “Presuppositionalism” has been thereby dispossessed of any clear meaning and has often died the death of a thousand qualifications. It is time, therefore, to change the terminology, at least for those who consider the approach of Cornelius Van Til to be consistent with Reformed theology and its creeds.

Because what Van Til was arguing had its roots in historic, Reformed theology, it would be natural to delineate his apologetic approach simply as Reformed. However, there is a breadth and depth to the adjective *Reformed* that may make it too ambiguous as a modifier for apologetics. I propose, in light of the above, that the word *covenantal*, properly understood, is a better, more accurate, more specific term to use for a biblical, Reformed apologetic. I hope in what follows to explain Van Til’s presuppositional apologetics and in the process to make a case for a terminology switch, a switch to a *covenantal apologetic*.

To understand this approach to apologetics, as well as to justify the change in terminology, we need a clear understanding of the word *covenant*. For that, we begin with the Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1, “Of God’s Covenant with Man”:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which He has been pleased to express by way of covenant.

We need to highlight the most important ideas in this section. First of all, we are reminded that, in the beginning, *and quite apart from the entrance of sin*, the distance between God and the creature is “so great.” But just what is this distance? Is it an actual spatial distance between

⁴Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published in 1962, made the notions of paradigms and presuppositions much more commonplace than they were before.

God and humanity? That doesn't seem possible, given that God is everywhere; there is no place where he is absent. So the "distance" referred to here must be metaphorical. It should not be interpreted as primarily spatial.

Rather, it might be best to think of it as a distance based on the character of God himself in relation to the character of man. The "distance," in other words, might be analogous to the distance between man and a snail. There are similarities between a man and a snail—both are capable of physical motion, both depend on the necessities of life. But it is not possible for a snail to transcend its own character in a way that would allow it to converse, communicate, and relate to man on a human level. We could call this an *ontological* difference; a difference according to the *being* of the snail relative to the *being* of man. Or, perhaps better, there is a necessary and vast *distinction* between the two kinds of beings.

This is the case as well with respect to God and man, according to this section of the Confession. There is a vast, qualitative distinction between God's character and ours, between God's being and the being of man. God is One "who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible . . ." (WCF 2.1). He is not restricted or confined by space; he is not subject to the passing of moments; he is not composed of anything outside of his own infinite character; he does not change; he cannot be fully understood.

We, however, are none of those things. We have no analogies of what those attributes are, and we are unable completely to comprehend them. We are finite, bodily, mutable, and constrained by time and space. This disparity is impossible to state adequately, but it is a difference, a vast difference, and one that includes a kind of "distance" between us and God.

There is a great chasm fixed between God and his creatures, and the result of such a chasm is that we, all of humanity, could *never* have any fruition of God, unless he saw fit, voluntarily (graciously), to condescend to us by way of covenant.⁵ That condescension includes God's

⁵For a fuller and more technical discussion of God's covenantal condescension, in light of his "distance" from us, see K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

revealing himself in and through his creation, including his word, to man. We begin, therefore, with respect to who we *are* and to what we can *know*, with a fundamental distinction between the Creator and the creature.

Contrary to some opinions, God is in fact Totally Other. But there is nothing intrinsic to this truth that would preclude God from revealing himself to his creatures. Since God is Totally Other from creation, our understanding of him and our communication and communion with him can take place only by his initiative. That initiative is his condescension, including his revelation. Such revelation, as the exclusive means of knowledge of and communion with God, *assumes* rather than *negates* God's utter "otherness."

So God decided to create. He did not have to create, but he determined that he would. The high point of that creation was the creation of man, Adam and Eve. These were the only aspects of all of God's creation that were called "image of God" and were meant to show off God's character.

In creating man, God voluntarily determined, at the same time, to establish a relationship with him. That relationship is properly designated a *covenant*; it is established unilaterally by God, and it places obligations on man with respect to that relationship. It comes to man by virtue of God's revelation, both in the world, defined here as every created thing, and in his spoken word.

This has sweeping implications for apologetics. Given that all men are in covenant relationship to God, they are bound by that relationship to "owe obedience unto Him as their Creator." That obligation of obedience comes by virtue of our being created—we were created as covenant beings. We are people who, by nature, have an obligation to worship and serve the Creator. That much has been true since the beginning.

But as we have said, something went terribly wrong. Man fell from his original state and consequently lost the ability and the will to worship and serve the Creator. The covenant relationship that, prior to the fall, existed in harmony with the Creator's will was, after the fall, a relationship of animosity and rebellion on our side, and was one of wrath on the side of the Creator.

But there was still a relationship. It is not that man ceased to be a covenant creature after the fall. He was still responsible to God to obey and worship him. He turned this responsibility, however, into occasions for rebellion. Instead of walking with God in the cool of the day, man began to try to hide from God, to fight with God, to run from him, to use the abilities and gifts he had been given to attempt to thwart the plan of God and to construe for himself a possible world in which he was not dependent on God at all.

So God provided a way in which the obedience owed him and the worship due his name could be accomplished. He sent his own Son, who alone obeyed the spirit and letter of the law, and who also went to the cross to take the penalty we deserve in order that those who would come to him in faith would be declared not guilty before the tribunal of the covenant Judge. And those who thus put their faith in him, as a part of their obedience to him, may be called on, and thus required, to answer the challenges and questions that come from those who will not bow the knee to Christ.

Enter apologetics. To whom is the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” to be defended? Given the above, it is to be defended at least to those who are *covenant breakers*—those whose relationship to God is defined by rebellion and denial. The apostle Paul gives us something of the psychology of these covenant breakers in Romans 1 and 2; we will highlight some of his main points in those chapters here. Given the importance of Paul’s discussion, however, it will be necessary for us to elaborate on his themes in these passages throughout this book.

Paul begins, first of all (Rom. 1:18–23), by asserting that the attributes of God have been both clearly seen and understood since the creation of the world. That is, Paul is telling us here, part of what it means to be created in God’s image is that man *inescapably* knows God. It is not simply that he knows *that* a god exists. But, says Paul, man—*every man*—knows God, the true God, the God who made all things. We can say unequivocally, therefore, that by virtue of man’s being created in the image of God, by virtue of man’s being a covenant creature, *every human being on the face of the earth since creation and into eternity* has an ineradicable knowledge of God—a knowledge that is given *through the things that were made*, which includes, of course, *every-*

thing (except God himself). In order for man to have this ineradicable knowledge, he must know the things created, for it is through those things that the knowledge of God comes. So in knowing a particular thing, man knows God who reveals himself in and through that thing (including man himself). Thus, man knows God if and when he knows anything else.

This was in part Calvin's point in beginning the *Institutes* as he did. "Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."⁶ There can be no separation between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. To the extent that we know ourselves truly, to that extent we know God truly; the two are inextricably moored. This is part of what it means to be *image* of God. To try to know ourselves without knowing God would be like trying to know our image in a mirror when we were not standing in front of it. There would be no image because the "original" would not be there. True self-knowledge depends on God-knowledge (and vice versa). So it is also that in the act of knowing, to the extent that we know something truly, we know it as created, that is, as having its origin and its sustaining existence in God.⁷ To claim to know something while thinking it to be independent of God (or to deny that there is a God) is to fail to know it for what it *really* is. Whatever it is, it is created and sustained by God at every moment.

But Paul introduces a problem in this passage. Man does not willingly submit himself to the knowledge of God that comes in and through creation. On the contrary, God's wrath is revealed from heaven precisely because man, in knowing God, suppresses the truth of that knowledge in unrighteousness, worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:18, 23, 25). As a covenant creature, man takes his relationship to God, graciously initiated by God's condescension, and attempts to hold down its truth and the implications of that truth, fabricating for himself idols to take the place of the God whom he knows to exist and to whom he knows he owes worship (cf. WCF 21.1, 7).

It is not the case, then, as Thomas Aquinas supposed, that knowl-

⁶John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.1.1.

⁷Van Til speaks of "false knowledge," which is knowledge but which refuses to acknowledge the ground and source of knowledge, namely, God himself.

edge of the existence of God is not self-evident to us;⁸ rather, such knowledge is an integral aspect of our covenant relationship with God and can no more be eradicated from our souls than can our souls themselves be annihilated. The problem is not with the *evidence*, but with the “*receptacle*,” (i.e., the sinful person) to which the evidence constantly (through creation) comes.

It is this covenant dynamic of always knowing while suppressing (what I will call a *sensus/suppression* dynamic) that a Reformed, covenantal apologetic seeks to incorporate. It may be helpful here to elucidate the application of this “knowing while suppressing” principle by attempting to make some distinctions.

Man (male and female) did not cease to be human after the fall. There were certain aspects after the fall that were in continuity with the pre-fall situation. It should be obvious from our reading of Scripture that while every aspect of man was affected by sin, so that we are all *totally* depraved, we still remain *people* made in God’s image. Whatever was essential to being a person prior to the fall was retained after the entrance of sin. And since one essential aspect of man was his being created in the image of God, that image, at least to some extent, remained after the fall. We are still, by virtue of our very constitution, covenant creatures even after the fall; we are still accountable to God and we still owe God unqualified allegiance. This is true for all people everywhere and at all times, so that the *universal situation* is such that we all live as creatures of God, knowing him, and responsible to him.

In terms of our *actions* (including our thoughts, attitudes, motives, and desires), however, there was *radical* change. Whereas Adam and Eve gladly served God in the garden, once sin entered the world “all the thoughts and intentions of the heart were *only evil continually*” (Gen. 6:5). It is no longer the case that man is able not to sin (*posse non peccare*), as it was before the fall. Rather, his entire direction is changed; it is subverted and perverted, so that now for man it is not possible not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). This depravity, this sinfulness, which extends itself to the entire person, is rebellion in the face of the knowledge of

⁸Cf. *Summa theologica*, 1.2.1.

God. It is *covenant* sinfulness—before the face and in the context of the clear, distinct, and personal knowledge of God.

So we remain fundamentally who we are as image of God. We will always be image of God. We will be image of God even in our eternal existence, whether in hell or in the new heaven and new earth. The very reason we are made to live eternally has to do with our character as image. None other of God's animate creation will live eternally as covenant creatures. Only man was given that gift.

But since the fall, given the above, we became, in the truest sense of the word, *irrational*. That is, we sinfully and deceptively convince ourselves that what is actually true about the world is *not* true. We create a world of our own making, where we are all gods. What we now seek to do and how we seek to live and think are set in polar opposition to the world as it actually is. Our actions are in opposition to what they were originally intended to do.

So also, the image that we are becomes something horrific. Trying to make ourselves out to be gods, we distort both who we are and who God is. We are at war with our true identity. Always and everywhere in covenant relationship with God our Creator, we seek the utterly impossible and unobtainable; we seek autonomy.

If this is really the way things are since the fall, then the apologetic task is always, or at least *should* always be, set within and controlled by that covenant relationship which is a universal condition of every person. Man's denial of God is not something done in ignorance. It is evidence of the suppression of the knowledge of God within us. Our refusal to acknowledge God is not, as has been supposed, an *agnostic* refusal—that is, it is *not* a refusal based on ignorance—but it is culpable rebellion. Since the fall we are and remain, as Paul clearly states, without excuse.

This is, as we said, irrational. It militates against the way the world actually is. So it is incumbent on the apologist to ask the unbeliever to justify his own position. Suppose the unbeliever is convinced of his own autonomy. We could ask how, for example, it can be that he thinks himself worthy of complete trust so that he is the origin of truth itself.

Even as we begin to ask some probing questions, though, we cannot simply accept the unbeliever's self-diagnosis, as if in his sin he

is able and willing to assess his own condition accurately. Imbedded in the sinful heart is the paradox of self-deception—the steadfast commitment to knowing but suppressing; a commitment to deny the world as it is, even with regard to one’s own fundamental identity, in order to attempt to assert our supposed autonomy. So we should not expect that the unbeliever will properly analyze his own sinful condition in the world. He will, as far as he is true to his own sinful principle, seek to suppress the actual situation and set forth the (literally) make-believe world that he is working so hard to build.

It will not do, then, for the apologist simply to start on the Yellow Brick Road with his unbelieving friend and assume that it will lead to Kansas. Once one begins on a make-believe road, it can only lead to more of the same; one cannot leave the land of Oz by taking a road that is, *in its entirety, within* Oz. The only way back to the real world of Kansas is to get off the road altogether and change the mind-set that trusted in the Yellow Brick Road in the first place.

This is what a covenantal apologetic seeks to do. It seeks to take the truth of Scripture as the proper diagnosis of the unbelieving condition *and* challenge the unbeliever to make sense of the world he has made. Scripture tells us that a world built on the foundation of unbelief does not exist; it is a figment of an unbelieving imagination, and thus is basically irrational.

If we want to use a philosophical term for this approach (which is not necessary but could be useful at times), a covenantal apologetic is *transcendental*. A transcendental approach looks for the (so-called) *preconditions* for knowledge and life. It does not simply assume that knowledge is the same for believer and unbeliever alike. Instead, this approach asks questions about the basic foundations of an unbelieving position. In asking those questions, it also recognizes that what Scripture says is true. It recognizes, for example, that the only reason there can *be* an unbelieving position is that God is who he says he is, people are what God says they are, and they all, even unbelievers, “live and move and have [their] being” in the triune God (Acts 17:28).

So the unbelieving position *both* has its own presumed foundations *and* needs Christian foundations in order even to oppose the latter. There are two worlds colliding in every unbelieving position,

therefore. There is the world the unbeliever is attempting to build, a world that is illusory. And there is the *real* world, the world where the triune God reigns, controlling whatsoever comes to pass—even the unbelieving position itself. This apologetic approach, then, tries to make obvious both the presuppositions of the unbelieving position itself and the covenantal presuppositions that are at work in order to challenge the unbelieving position at its root. In that sense, it is a *radical* (from *radix*, “root”) approach. It attempts as much as possible to get to the root of the problematic position.

In the chapters below, we will be looking at examples of how these truths might be applied to unbelief.

The Ten Tenets

Having looked at the most basic Christian truths and the biblical mandate for a covenantal approach to apologetics, I would like to set out ten crucial theological tenets for a covenantal, Christian apologetic that will be necessary to keep in mind throughout the rest of the book. The list itself is not exhaustive, and as in much theology, there could be useful debates on the relative priority of each of them. But what should be noncontroversial are the tenets themselves, each of which is a substantial part of a covenantal approach to apologetics. These tenets will make their appearance in different ways and contexts as we proceed, some more applicable or obvious than others.

It will be important to keep these tenets at the forefront as we work through the rest of this book. For that reason, I will also list them at the end of this chapter and it might be useful to copy that list and have it within one’s purview while reading. In that way, it will soon become more obvious which tenets are being applied in later chapters, and how.

The ten tenets certainly deserve more space than I am giving them here, but there are excellent resources already available for most of them. A book could easily be written on each one. Readers unfamiliar with (some of) them may fruitfully consult other literature to gain a fuller understanding of them. When resources come to mind, I will mention them below. However, I will be mentioning resources with which I am most familiar (e.g., my own), and a more thorough search

will produce other, perhaps better resources than I have highlighted. I will provide a short list of recommended titles at the end of this chapter for anyone interested in pursuing the theological and apologetic backdrop to these tenets.

The primary reason I prefer at this point simply to summarize these tenets is twofold. First, the tendency with a covenantal approach to apologetics is to talk or write *about* it and its principles, rather than to demonstrate how it might look in action. I hope in this book to explain the biblical rationale for a covenantal approach as we move along in each chapter, but I also want to *show* at least one way to respond to some attacks and objections that have been lodged against Christianity. In that way, I am not primarily concerned just with the tenets, but am concerned with their actual use.

Second, and following on the first, I am assuming that readers will be (more or less) familiar with the basic thrust of these tenets. Readers completely unfamiliar with them can begin by working through the recommended resources at the end of this chapter. My concern, again, is primarily with these tenets as foundational for *application* in defending the Christian faith. The aim here is to *apply*, as much as to present, these crucial and central tenets of a covenantal apologetic.

In light of this, the ten tenets are as follows:

1. The faith that we are defending must begin with, and necessarily include, the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who, as God, condescends to create and to redeem.

Generic theism is no part of the Christian faith. Why this is the case will become clearer later on. At this point we need only recognize that any defense that does not include the triune God is a defense of a false theism. And theism of this sort is not a step *toward* Christianity, but an idolatrous reaction to (suppression of) the truth. Thus, a belief in theism that is not Christian theism is a sinful suppression of the truth. It masks, rather than moves toward, true knowledge of the triune God.

In saying that we “must begin with” the triune God, we are not saying that a covenantal apologetic must always *begin its apologetic discussion* with the triune God. Rather, we are saying that we must never assume that we are defending anything but what God himself,

as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, has accomplished in creation and redemption. To “begin with” and “necessarily include” the triune God means that we stand squarely on Christian truth, including a Christian understanding of God, when we engage in our defense. Again, this *does not* mean that all of our conversations or discussions have to articulate this at the start. How this looks will become clearer as we move along.

2. God’s covenantal revelation is authoritative by virtue of what it *is*, and any covenantal, Christian apologetic will necessarily stand on and utilize that authority in order to defend Christianity.

As we have seen, God’s revelation is covenantal because (1) it initiates a relationship between God and humanity and (2) it entails obligations. This means that we cannot begin our discussion with the assumption that the intellectual, moral, or conversational ground on which we and the unbeliever are standing is the same. The very *reason* there is a debate between us is that our respective authorities are in conflict. Just as an unbeliever will stand on his own chosen ground in order to debate and discuss, so also will we.

This is an important point, in that its most consistent expression is found in Reformed theology. Thus, it is intrinsic to a covenantal apologetic. The point itself is put concisely and most helpfully in the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.4 (and, verbatim, in the Savoy Declaration and the London Baptist Confession): “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, depends not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.” This is one of those truths that forms the foundation of our apologetic approach. However, it is another one of those truths that we do not necessarily or in every case present as an integral part of our actual discussion or argument. But as Christians, we need to have this teaching firmly in place.

Note that the Confession is focusing here on Scripture’s *authority*. That authority is not something that comes to it from the outside; it is not something *given to* or *imposed* on Scripture by another, external authority—not by “any man or church.” Rather, Scripture’s authority is tied inextricably to its author, God himself. As Christians, therefore,

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we accept the authority of Scripture, and we believe and receive it “because it is the word of God.”⁹

So while there can be arguments given for Scripture’s authority (the next section in the Confession gives a partial list of those), those arguments seek to *explain* and not to *establish* the authority itself. This has deep implications for apologetics, as we will see.

3. It is the truth of God’s revelation, together with the work of the Holy Spirit, that brings about a covenantal change from one who is in Adam to one who is in Christ.

The import of this tenet is that it encourages, even requires, us to communicate the truth of God, since it is just that truth that the Holy Spirit uses to change hearts. We must remember here that we are attempting to defend the *Christian* faith, not a generic theism. So, as in evangelism, there needs to be a communication of that faith if there is going to be any hope of a change of mind *and heart*.

4. Man (male and female) as image of God is in covenant with the triune God for eternity.

We noted this above, but the importance of this can hardly be overstated. What it means is that all people, just because they are image of God, are responsible to God for everything they are, do, and think. They are, therefore, in *covenant* with him for eternity. Every person lives *coram Deo*, that is, before the face of God, and thus is responsible to God for his every thought and action. This responsibility is presumed in the final judgment. God will judge *all men* on that day. Those who have rejected him will be eternally punished for that rejection, and those who have trusted him will be eternally rewarded. This judgment assumes that the entirety of humanity is responsible to the same God; all are *obligated* to obey him because he is their Creator and Sustainer. God, then, has a sovereign right over all humanity.

5. All people know the true God, and that knowledge entails covenantal obligations.

As we noted above, this tenet is concise but is crucial to grasp. It does not mean that all people *can* know God. Nor does it mean that all peo-

⁹See K. Scott Oliphint, “Because It Is the Word of God,” in *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. David B Garner (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2012).

ple know that something, somewhere is bigger than they are. Scripture is clear that all people *know God* (Rom. 1:18–20). All people know the true God because God makes himself known. The knowledge that we all have is sufficient so that if we refuse to respond to it properly, we will stand without excuse before God on the day of judgment.

This knowledge is not knowledge that we, through some process of inference, may acquire for ourselves. The point that Paul makes in Romans 1:19 is that all of us have this knowledge *because God gives it to us*. In other words, the revelation of God and his character that is given in all of creation is also given to each and every person by virtue of God’s own revelatory activity.

6. Those who are and remain in Adam suppress the truth that they know. Those who are in Christ see that truth for what it is.

God gives sufficient knowledge of himself to all of his human creatures. That knowledge is true knowledge; it is not a vague or imprecise feeling or a sporadic experience of something greater. It is true *knowledge* of God. But because of the effects of sin in our hearts, we seek, if we are in Adam, to hold that knowledge down. In our sins, we will not acknowledge it. Instead, we deceive ourselves into thinking that there is no God, or that we cannot know him, or that we can get by on our own, or a million other falsehoods that serve only to mask the clear truth that God continually gives to us through the things he has made (Rom. 1:20).

7. There is an absolute, covenantal antithesis between Christian theism and any other, opposing position. Thus, Christianity is true and anything opposing it is false.

This should be obvious to any Christian, but it is oftentimes not as prominent in our thinking as it ought to be. When we claim to be Christians, we are doing more than just listing a biographical detail. We are claiming that the truth set forth in God’s revelation describes the way things *really and truly* are in the world. That is, we are saying that what God says about the world is the way the world *really* is.

Any view or position that opposes what God has said is therefore, by definition, false and does not “fit” with the way the real world is. This means that the views of any who remain in unbelief are, in reality, illusions. They do not and cannot make sense of the world as it really

is. Not only so, but, we should notice, there are at bottom only two options available to us. Either we bow the knee to Christ and affirm the truth of what God says, or we oppose him and thus attempt to “create” a world of our own making. No matter what kind of opposition there is to Christianity, before we even know the details of that opposition, we know that it cannot make sense of the real world. We know that it is self-destructive.

This is a great comfort and should help us to be more confident of our defense. We need not fear or be threatened by any view that we encounter. Even before we know the details of that view, we know from the outset that it cannot stand of its own weight; it cannot match the way the world is. When we begin to learn the details of an opposing view, then, we do so with the initial conviction that there will be no way for that view to actually make sense of the real world. Any view that opposes Christianity cannot be consistently thought or consistently lived.

8. Suppression of the truth, like the depravity of sin, is total but not absolute. Thus, every unbelieving position will necessarily have within it ideas, concepts, notions, and the like that it has taken and wrenched from their true, Christian context.

In properly understanding the biblical doctrine of sin as total depravity, we affirm that *all* of man is affected by sin (total depravity), but we also affirm that man is not as bad as he could be (absolute depravity). In the same way, when someone suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, that suppression is total. There is nothing that he knows, thinks, and does that is not affected by it. *But it is not absolute.* He cannot completely eradicate or submerge the knowledge of God that is always his and always being given by God.

Thus, there will be aspects of the truth of the knowledge of God that surface in those who are in Adam. So, for example, even though an unbeliever will recognize that two plus two equals four, the very fact that he would hold that truth to be independent of God’s creating and sustaining activity means that he does not know that truth *as it really is*. This may not affect the equation itself, but neither will God say to him on judgment day, “Good for you; you got that part right.” Those who die in Adam will be held responsible for every fact (even two plus two equals four) that they took from God’s world, even as they refused

to acknowledge the facts to be God's facts in the first place. So just as the man who remains in Adam can continue to think, work, and so on, that thinking and working will only serve, in the end, to further condemn him.¹⁰

9. The true, covenantal knowledge of God in man, together with God's universal mercy, allows for persuasion in apologetics.

Some might want to argue that if tenet 7 above is correct, then there is no use discussing, debating, or arguing about the truth of Christianity, since man is either in one "world" or in the other. If there is such a divide, it might be asked, how can we even reach those who live in a world of their own making?¹¹

The answer is twofold. First, because people always and everywhere know the true God, whenever we speak God's truth to them, it "gets through" and "connects" to that knowledge that God is continually giving to them. Second, because God's universal mercy restrains their sin in various ways, the depravity that might otherwise hinder our conversation is also restrained.

If we think of persuasion as an opportunity to take what the other person himself might hold or believe and to reframe that belief in a way that is consistent with Christianity, then we can begin to think about the best approach to someone who wants to reject Christianity altogether. I will provide examples of this as we go along, but initially we can point to Paul's use of the Greek poets in his address at the Aereopagus (Acts 17:16ff.; more on this in chapter 4). Paul co-opted those quotations and gave them Christian content, thereby drawing his audience in (by quoting and using what was familiar to them and was an aspect of their own worldview) while also pointing them to the truth of Christianity.

10. Every fact and experience is what it is by virtue of the covenantal, all-controlling plan and purpose of God.

This means that in every case, those who are outside of Christ, who remain in Adam, are nevertheless thoroughly embedded in the world

¹⁰See K. Scott Oliphint, "The Irrationality of Unbelief," in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007).

¹¹See K. Scott Oliphint, "A Primal and Simple Knowledge," in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes: Essays and Analysis*, ed. David Hall and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008).

that Christ created and controls. The breath they breathe, the lives they live, the people they know—all of it belongs to God and is therefore meant to be used to and for his glory. The facts of the world display God’s glory (Ps. 19:1ff.; Rom. 1:20). To take those facts for selfish use is to twist them and pervert them. This is culpable rebellion against God, and it takes place as those in Adam “live and move and have our being” in the triune God.

So in order for someone to understand one fact properly, that fact needs to be seen in the context of God’s plan and purposes. The explanation of the fact itself is not sufficient unless and until the context and purpose of that fact is known and acknowledged. For example, it is not enough simply to say that lions instinctively seek their prey because they are such good hunters; the real story includes the fact that

the young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God. (Ps. 104:21)

It is God who provides for the animals, not instinct.



Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane,
But the church of Jesus constant will remain.
Gates of hell can never 'gainst that church prevail;
We have Christ’s own promise, and that cannot fail.¹²

Tenets and Texts

The ten tenets above will surface in various discussions and examples as we continue. It is crucial to keep them in mind.

I promised, above, to provide a list of the ten tenets, as well as an initial collection of recommended sources for further reading. Those lists follow.

¹²Sabine Baring-Gould, “Onward Christian Soldiers,” 1865.

The Ten Tenets

1. The faith that we are defending must begin with, and necessarily include, the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who, as God, condescends to create and to redeem.
2. God's covenantal revelation is authoritative by virtue of what it *is*, and any covenantal, Christian apologetic will necessarily stand on and utilize that authority in order to defend Christianity.
3. It is the truth of God's revelation, together with the work of the Holy Spirit, that brings about a covenantal change from one who is in Adam to one who is in Christ.
4. Man (male and female) as image of God is in covenant with the triune God for eternity.
5. All people know the true God, and that knowledge entails covenantal obligations.
6. Those who are and remain in Adam suppress the truth that they know. Those who are in Christ see that truth for what it is.
7. There is an absolute, covenantal antithesis between Christian theism and any other, opposing position. Thus, Christianity is true and anything opposing it is false.
8. Suppression of the truth, like the depravity of sin, is total but not absolute. Thus, every unbelieving position will necessarily have within it ideas, concepts, notions, and the like that it has taken and wrenched from their true, Christian context.
9. The true, covenantal knowledge of God in man, together with God's universal mercy, allows for persuasion in apologetics.
10. Every fact and experience is what it is by virtue of the covenantal, all-controlling plan and purpose of God.

56 COVENANTAL APOLOGETICS

For Further Reading

The resources below have varying levels of complexity. I list them (roughly) from easy to more complex.

Oliphint, K. Scott. *The Battle Belongs to the Lord: The Power of Scripture for Defending Our Faith*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003.

Edgar, William. *Reasons of the Heart: Recovering Christian Persuasion*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.

Pratt, Richard L., Jr. *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979.

Frame, John M. *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994.

Notaro, Thom. *Van Til and the Use of Evidence*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980.

Oliphint, K. Scott. "The Irrationality of Unbelief." In *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, edited by K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton, 59–73. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007.

Oliphint, K. Scott, and Lane G. Tipton, eds. *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007.

Frame, John M. "Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic." *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (1985): 279–99.

Bahnsen, Greg L. *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998.

Edgar, William. "Two Christian Warriors: Cornelius Van Til and Francis A. Schaeffer Compared." *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (1995): 33–56.

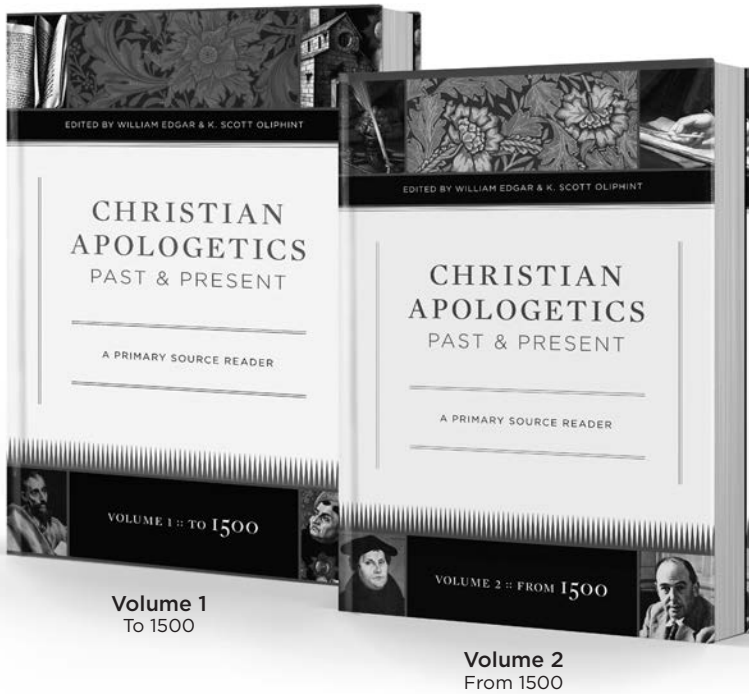
Van Til, Cornelius. *The Defense of the Faith*. 4th ed. Edited by K. Scott Oliphint. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008.

Oliphint, K. Scott. *Reasons for Faith: Philosophy in the Service of Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006.

Van Til, Cornelius. *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Revelation, Scripture, and God*. 2nd ed. Edited by William Edgar. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007.

Oliphint, K. Scott. *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012.

The Ultimate Primary Source Reader for Apologetics



Volume 1
To 1500

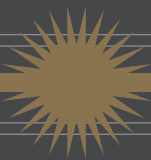
Volume 2
From 1500

With selections from the first century AD to the present day, these two volumes of primary sources include material and explanatory notes from more than 40 renowned apologists such as Justin Martyr, Augustine, Martin Luther, Francis Schaeffer, and William Lane Craig. A valuable resource for all those interested in defending the faith.

“Understanding apologetics as explicating, affirming, and vindicating Christianity in the face of uncertainty and skepticism, Edgar and Oliphint have skillfully selected the best primary sources to introduce us to this ongoing task. Their work fills a gap in scholarly resources and highlights the strength, wisdom, and solidity of the prominent defenders of our faith.”

J. I. PACKER, Board of Governors’ Professor of Theology, Regent College

DEFENDING THE FAITH can be daunting, and a well-reasoned and biblically grounded apologetic is essential for the challenge. Following in the footsteps of groundbreaking apologist Cornelius Van Til, Scott Oliphint presents us with an introduction to Reformed apologetics as he sets forth the principles behind a distinctly “covenantal” approach. This book clearly explains the theological foundations of covenantal apologetics and illustrates its application in real-world conversations with unbelievers—helping Christians to boldly, knowledgeably, and winsomely proclaim the gospel.



“A balanced mix of principles and practice, this book provides valuable instruction to those concerned with responding to the challenges of unbelief.”

RICHARD B. GAFFIN JR., *Professor Emeritus of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary*

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“Oliphint roots us in the unequivocal authority of God’s existence and his self-revelation.”

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“I highly recommend this work for anyone who is serious about engaging people with the truth of the gospel.”

STEPHEN J. WELLMUM, *Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary*

“Few people have thought as carefully about the relationship between confessional Reformed theology and Christian apologetics.”

JAMES ANDERSON, *Associate Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte*

“Equips readers not only for an intellectual contest of demolishing arguments, but also for a spiritual battle against the suppression of truth.”

NANCY GUTHRIE, *author, Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament series*

K. SCOTT OLIPHINT (PhD, Westminster Theological Seminary) is professor of apologetics and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

APOLOGETICS