

Justifying Christian belief

Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief

John M. Frame

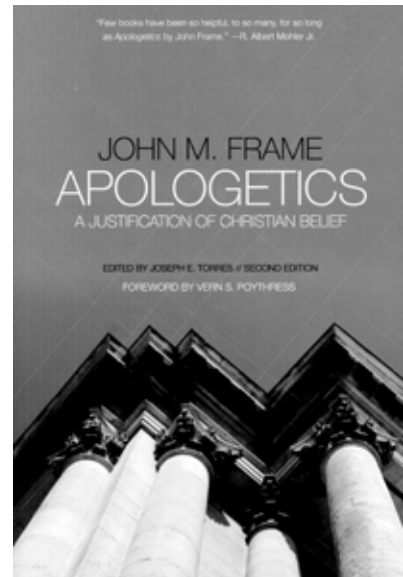
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The serious apologist must think seriously about what apologetics is, what it is trying to accomplish, and how it intersects with evangelism. John Frame's 20th anniversary edition of *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* does a good job of introducing a form of presuppositional apologetics thoroughly.

The main text is 288 pages (not counting foreword, introductions, glossary, indices, or bibliography, which add another 81 pages) and it is written at a level suitable for use in a college or seminary classroom. However, it should be accessible to pastors and laypeople who are serious about studying apologetics. Frame does a good job of defining his terms and making his ideas accessible to the average person, though the footnotes that often take up a substantial portion of the page can be daunting at times.

Apologetics is useful as a thorough introduction to the Van Tilian school of apologetics, i.e. that of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987), a founding professor of Westminster Theological Seminary and a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. But even those who disagree with his particular school should find elements which are useful. It is so wide-ranging that this review will focus on the main body of the book and not on the appendices, which provide useful peripheral data but which are ultimately optional reading.



Presuppositional apologetics

Frame is an unapologetic advocate of presuppositional apologetics from a Calvinist standpoint, but those who do not share his Reformed theology should still be able to gain valuable insights from the text. For him, presuppositional apologetics is simply assuming the Bible is true, and refusing to cede that fact for the sake of argument in dialoguing with those who disagree. “If we adopt the Word of God as our ultimate commitment, our ultimate standard, our ultimate criterion of the truth and falsity, God’s Word then becomes our ‘presupposition’” (p. 3). He disagrees that we can ever dialogue on a neutral basis:

“To tell the unbeliever that we can reason with him on a neutral basis, however that claim might help to attract his attention, is a lie. Indeed, it is a lie of the most serious kind, for it falsifies the very heart of the gospel—that Jesus Christ is *Lord*. There is no neutrality” (p. 8).

Some people argue that presuppositional apologetics is circular. Frame responds:

“It sounds circular to say that our faith governs our reasoning and also that it in turn is based on rationality. But it is important to remember that the rationality of which we speak, the rationality that serves as the rational basis for faith, is God’s own rationality. The sequence is as follows: God’s rationality → human faith → human reasoning. The arrows may be read ‘is the rational basis for’. So in this sense, the sequence is linear, not circular” (p. 10).

However, this has been criticized by some because the real conclusion is back to God’s rationality, so the argument is still circular.¹

Furthermore, everyone must use this sort of ‘circular’ thinking because: “... when one is arguing for an ultimate criterion, whether Scripture, the Qur’an, human reason, sensation, or whatever, one must use criteria compatible with that conclusion. If that is circularity, then everyone is guilty of circularity” (p. 11).

But this isn’t necessarily the case; circular thinking only arises when we try to prove presuppositions with those presuppositions. However, presuppositions are by definition not provable because they are the *beginning point* of our thinking.

General or natural revelation

While Scripture is our ultimate authority, Frame does not believe this prohibits Christian apologists from using arguments from outside of Scripture. This is because God has revealed Himself in creation (Romans 1).

“Natural revelation is every bit the word of God and absolutely authoritative. The difference is that Scripture is a verbal divine utterance that God gives us to

supplement and correct our view of his world. We must humbly accept that assistance. In doing so, we do not make Scripture more authoritative than natural revelation; rather, we allow the Word (with its ever-present Spirit) to correct our *interpretation* of natural revelation” (p. 22).

One criticism of this view is that “word of God” necessarily implies propositional revelation, which general revelation is not.² However, he rejects the common ‘two books’ view which in effect makes nature a 67th book of Scripture:

“That sort of argument has been used to justify relatively uncritical Christian acceptance of evolution, secular psychology, and so on. In such arguments, Scripture is not permitted to do its corrective work, to protect God’s people from the wisdom of the world (See 1 Cor. 2: 6–16)” (pp. 22–23).

The message of the apologist

Frame presents Christianity as a philosophy that can compete successfully against materialism, empiricism, and other philosophies because it contains all the essential elements of a worldview. In addition, Christianity has a number of unique advantages as a philosophy. Frame presents the idea of God as the Absolute Personality behind the universe, in contrast to the impersonal absolutes presented by atheistic philosophies. Assuming an Absolute Personality allows one to speak of meaning and rationality inherent in the universe. He says:

“The Christian apologist should lay more emphasis than did Cornelius Van Til on the issue of impersonalism vs personalism. It is this issue, as we have seen, that distinguishes the Christian worldview from all others” (p. 39).

If God created the universe, then we should expect the universe to

reflect aspects of His being and nature. Frame shows how the universe implies a sovereign God and even the Trinity.

Faith and evidence

Van Til argued that there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God, but the sort of proofs that most apologists present fail to convince unbelievers—at least for as long as they remain unbelievers. Frame deals with this by revising the concept of proof by saying not only does it have true premises and sound logic, but that it *ought* to be persuasive.

But Frame notes that Scripture rebukes those who demand proof for God’s existence—it states that God is clearly revealed but does not argue as such for His existence. And since God created and sustains everything, nothing is properly understood apart from Him. For most, the problem is not genuinely intellectual but rather sinful rebellion.

On the other hand, many are content to believe in God without proof of His existence, and Frame notes that Scripture praises childlike faith. But apologists must be ready to answer those who demand evidence for His existence.

Frame argues that there is no such thing as a genuine atheist because God has revealed Himself to everyone. However, people suppress this knowledge by ignoring and disobeying God. It is valid to appeal to this suppressed knowledge in our interactions with unbelievers.

The transcendental argument for the existence of God

Van Til popularized the ‘transcendental argument’ for the existence of God: in short, logic demands the existence of God.

“God is logically necessary in the sense that without him, the use of

	Van Til	Frame
Proof	There is “absolutely certain proof” for Christian theism.	We need to distinguish between the certainty of evidence for Christian theism (which is absolute) and our human arguments (which are fallible and often uncertain).
Neutrality	All reasoning must presuppose divine revelation. Reasoning is never religiously neutral.	I agree with enthusiasm.
Presuppositions	All reasoning must presuppose the absolute-personal Trinitarian Lord who exercises total and absolute control over his creation.	Again, I agree with enthusiasm.
Antithesis and common grace	Our reasoning must take into account both the noetic effects of sin and the restraining influence of common grace.	I agree, but nuance is needed.
Suppression	The unbeliever suppresses the truth by a dialectic of rationalism and irrationalism.	Agreed.
Evidence	We may freely use logical arguments and present evidences for the truth of Scripture. But we shouldn't do this 'endlessly' without challenging the unbeliever's philosophy of fact.	Agreed, with the proviso that we be permitted to vary our approach based on the nature and questions of our audience. We don't always need to explicitly speak of epistemology.
Proving Christian theism	We should always seek to prove Christian theism 'as a unit'.	Yes ... but. To some extent it is legitimate to prove one fact about God at a time, being careful not to distort the whole in expounding the parts.
Certainty or probability?	Our arguments should always claim absolute certainty, never mere probability.	See the first point above. It is legitimate in some cases, and even unavoidable, to use arguments that claim only probability.
Should we 'supplement' the unbeliever's knowledge?	We should not produce arguments that merely “supplement” the unbeliever's knowledge. We should seek to overturn the very foundations of his thought.	If we reject an extreme view of antithesis, we must recognize that there will be elements of truth in unbelieving thought. This is not to deny the importance of overturning the foundations of unbelieving thought, for elements of truth in unbelieving thought are at variance with its foundational commitment.
Direct or indirect arguments?	A truly transcendental approach is indirect rather than direct.	Any indirect argument of this sort can be turned into a direct argument by some creative rephrasing. If the indirect form is sound, the direct form will be too—and vice versa.

Figure 1. Table reproduced from p. 94

logic would be impossible. He is the source of all order in the world and in the human mind, including logical order” (p. 70).

Atheists would argue that they can use logic perfectly well without the existence of God, but the point is that they have no *explanation* for logic apart from God. That is, natural selection would only select for survival value, not necessarily for logical thought.

Ethics also demands the existence of God—in fact, every ethical system

assumes there is an absolute ethical standard to which we all are subject. But as Frame points out:

“... secular theories cannot show why moral standards *obligate*. ... Moral standards can be obligatory only if their source is a *person* who *deserves* absolute obedience and reveals his will to human beings” (p. 72).

And only the God revealed in the Bible fits that standard. This does not mean that atheists do not have ethical

systems, but they have no adequate foundation for those moral principles. Even science demands the existence of God because it assumes an orderly universe in which scientific tests can be performed.

Frame differs with Van Til's strategy regarding the use of the transcendental argument, however, in that he is willing to pair it with more traditional apologetic arguments such as the cosmological argument. He also differs with Van Til's apologetic

method in some important respects, which he summarizes in a table, reproduced in figure 1.

Arguing against atheism and agnosticism

Frame presents examples of how to prove God's existence. In answering agnostics, he simply observes that if anyone were *truly* unsure about whether God exists, one would expect them to 'hedge their bets' or seek after certainty one way or another. However, in practice most of them are indistinguishable from atheists, so can be addressed using the same general arguments.

Frame recommends using the moral argument against atheists—we all act and think as if our moral values are not subjective but objective. And he identifies truth as an ethical value: "The truth is what we ought to believe and what we ought to speak with one another. And these *oughts* are *oughts* of ethical value" (p. 100). Furthermore, subjective ethical statements are always self-contradictory because the atheist cannot logically state that there are absolutely no absolutes, and so on. Using the moral argument, the apologist can also point to the Ultimate Personality argument summarized above.

Frame finishes the chapter by evaluating many of the classic arguments for God, including the teleological argument, the cosmological argument, and the ontological argument.

Proving the Gospel

Frame's chapter on Scripture is an excellent overview on why Christians should be confident about the authority and reliability of Scripture. Frame begins with Scripture's own doctrine of itself—i.e. Scripture claims to be the Word of God and speaks with the authority we would expect such a book to command. Liberal³ scholars who

reject the supernatural inspiration of Scripture do not have any good reason to do so; rather, they reject Scripture's divine inspiration *a priori* because of anti-supernaturalist presuppositions. In fact, many liberal pronouncements about Scripture (such as claims about late composition) have had to be rescinded as new evidence has come to light vindicating Scripture. There are several lines of evidence Frame lays out to defend the divine inspiration of Scripture, including the argument from prophecy, New Testament miracles, and the Resurrection of Jesus.

The problem of evil

Frame examines many attempted solutions to the problem of evil and finds them wanting. He critiques the idea of evil as illusion, the claim that the best possible world is one in which evil exists, and the defence that God is not the *proximate* cause of evil, as well as others.

Rather, he argues that Scripture gives us a definite answer regarding natural evil in that natural evil was caused by man's sin. Furthermore, we cannot accuse God of injustice because we are not in a position to judge Him.

Comments on evolution

Frame comments a few times on evolution as an excuse some use for rejecting Scripture and gives his reasons for rejecting evolution as an explanation for life on earth. Genesis clearly teaches the creation of distinct 'kinds' of creatures and a special creation of Adam (who he takes to be the historical first man). His understanding of the limitations of natural selection is also noteworthy. There is only one comment in the book that would suggest his views on the age of the earth—unfortunately this seems to show that he accepts the evolutionary timescale. He says: "it

is not clear that being logical always or even usually preserves life; after all, cockroaches have inhabited the world much longer than man" (p. 111). Fortunately, he does not attempt to use compromise on timescale as a way to make Christianity more intellectually respectable as some do.

A useful primer

Many people who study apologetics are 'disciples' of a particular teacher, and Van Til enjoys a substantial following. Frame stands firmly in the Van Til school, but with some important caveats that greatly improve the usefulness of his apologetic.

The greatest strength of Frame's apologetic is that he unapologetically stands on the authority of Scripture and refuses to cede that ground in the context of speaking with unbelievers. His responses to some common apologetic arguments that fall short are also very useful. This volume is a useful explanation of Van Til's apologetic that will be of interest to those of the same viewpoint or who want to know more about it.

References

1. Beisner, E.C., *Classical Presuppositional Apologetics: Re-introducing an Old Theme*, 2001, revised 2006, ecalvinbeisner.com/freetarticles/ClassPresup.pdf.
2. See Kulikovsky, A.S., Scripture and general revelation, *J. Creation* 19(2):23, August 2005.
3. Frame defines liberal theology as "all theology (including so-called neo-orthodoxy) that does not accept the final authority of Scripture" (p. 133, note 9).