Disciples Church

A Firm Foundation – Presuppositional Apologetics vs. Evidential Apologetics

Week of July 11th, 2018

**TEACHING NOTES**

Recap:

Good evening! I pray that this series has been a blessing to you all. Remember, please continue to keep writing down questions. Starting next week, we will post an email address to start receiving questions so that we can answer these questions in our final week.

Before we dig into our lesson tonight, I want to briefly recap some of what we’ve so far studied.

What is a presupposition? It is an assumed belief or interpreting lens by which we see the world. For instance, the Christian believes that the Scriptures are the Word of God. Thus, the Christian aims to see everything through that lens. That is a presupposition.

What is an apologetic? This word comes from the Greek word apologia and it means simply to give a defense.

Presuppositional apologetics is then the study of apologetics through a specific lens as the Ultimate standard as the defense basis. The Ultimate standard is Scripture. Scripture shapes and sheds light on all things. It testifies of the one true God. It is God’s means of revealing special revelation to us. God has seen fit to reveal himself in many different special revelations. He spoke directly to Adam and Eve. In this age, he speaks to us through the 66 books of the protestant canon of scripture.

We have also talked about the atheist/nonbeliever. We’ve used the example that trying to prove the existence of God is like trying to prove the existence of the sun on a hot day to an atheist who is putting sun screen on. They live in God’s world. God is the Creator, we are the creation. We are dependent upon him for all knowledge, life, sustenance, being, etc. They cannot escape His world. They are utterly dependent upon God for all being, including thinking and reasoning. Thus, when they reason to reject God, they are stealing what is rightfully created by God (reason & logic) and trying to disprove what is plainly in front of their noses with the very mechanism that God Himself has created. It’s foolishness. It’s a vicious cycle. It’s literally like me using sun screen to disprove the existence of the sun.

The Scriptures bear witness to the character of God and reveal to man the gospel, which is true knowledge. The only way to know anything at all (in terms of true knowledge – i.e., saving faith), is to accept that the Scriptures are the ultimate standard. If we adopt lesser standards, we show that we are attempting to build a worldview/foundation upon something that is foolish. How is it foolish? Scripture does not remain silent on these matters:

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

All men and women, prior to the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit, suppress the truth of God in their hearts. The atheist knows God exists, but he/she is suppressing the truth of God. So, what the atheist needs most is not a good reason to believe in God, as this assumes that he has the capacity as a dead person to give himself life. Rather, what the atheist or nonbeliever needs most is the gospel of Jesus Christ, as the prerequisite God has ordained in order to be brought to life, so that he/she sees the truth of the ultimate standard and that whom it testifies to – Jesus Christ.

I pray that these reminders of our foundation are helpful. I know that this topic can at times be difficult to wrap our heads around, but I believe it will genuinely give us a firm foundation to speak boldly for Jesus Christ to those whom we love.

Let’s dig into our topic tonight.

To begin, let me bring some clarity about terms…

***True Knowledge***

A point that is worth pondering is this statement: ***God’s word is the chief source of understanding TRUE knowledge.***

I want to flesh this out a little bit because this point can be a little misguided. We aren’t saying that nonbelievers cannot think. No, they obviously can think. God created man with specific cognitive faculties that extend to all men because all men were made in His image. Knowledge, according to scripture, is much more than just facts. It’s answering the ultimate why behind those facts.

Proverbs 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Of this passage John Gil, says: “This is the first of all sciences to be learned, and it is the principal one; it is the basis and foundation of all the rest, on which they depend; and it is the head, the fountain, the root an source, from whence they spring; and unless a man knows God, knows God in Christ, and worships him in his fear, in spirit and in truth, according to his revealed will, he knows nothing as he ought to know; and all his knowledge will be of no avail and profit to him; this is the first and chief thing in spiritual and evangelical knowledge, and without which all natural knowledge will signify nothing.”

For instance, a nonbeliever is capable of detailing what wind is, in a rough scientific sense. But, the unbeliever has no way of understanding what the wind reveals to us about God. Wind can testify of God’s grace. Have you ever been surrounded by gnats when a sudden breeze blows them all away? Wind can also testify of God’s wrath. Have you ever seen the shear destructive force of a tornado? The nonbeliever can, in a sense, understand wind but they cannot truly know why it is wind or what it is meant to point us to. Ultimately, they have no foundation for why those things are understandable. Remember, even though they can measure wind, how can they know that 5 mph today will be 5 mph tomorrow? How can they know that the very sensors they’re using to measure the wind will report consistently? They can’t. Because, according to their evolutionary and materialistic universe, nothing is truly knowable. Suppressing truth, one has said:

There are no eternal facts, as there are no absolute truths. - Friedrich Nietzsche

You see in order for us to know anything for certain about anything we must know all things exhaustively or get truth from the One who does (God), otherwise what we don’t know could prove what we think we know to be wrong.

The unique distinctiveness of the triune God is the only possible explanation of our universe. We’re created to be in relationship, to love, etc. This is a testament to the triune nature of our creator. An Islamic god is monotheistic and thus has no concept of other-centered love. Or, take the Mormon concept of god. They have a current sitting prophet, as well as past prophets who have made various failed prophecies. What does that tell you about their concept of god? A prophet is to communicate God’s very word to the people. Within Mormonism, with many failed prophecies, their god is certainly not all knowing! Thus, he is not the perfect source of knowledge. We must have a source of knowledge that knows everything. There cannot be something that it doesn’t know!

This also extends to absolute moral standards. The nonbeliever cannot give me the moral implications of relationship. They cannot state unequivocally that God has created relationship in His image bearers to reflect the nature of Himself. Why does mankind care about marriage? Because we were created to love another as our self.

Likewise, the nonbeliever has no moral standard. Monogamy is baseless. Heterosexuality is just one of many different options.

Christians can ponder how much our Heavenly Father loves us when we see that he creates for us deeply rich friendships or even marriage and others for whom we can be in relationship with.

The nonbeliever cannot understand the implications of these things as they deny the obvious – that God exists and he has revealed himself to us through nature and His word.

Presuppositional Apologetics vs. Evidential Apologetics

***Introduction***

With that clarity, let’s move on to our discussion of two different schools of apologetics. Our aim in this is to help you navigate the difference so that you can rightly understand the function of each method of apologetics. They are both profitable if we apply them correctly, but if not rightly understood, they can both be setbacks for the Christian witness.

***Apologetics:***

Why should we give a defense of the faith? Is this necessary? Peter and Paul, to name a few, thought it was. They practiced and taught that we should.

1 Peter 3:15 but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect

Acts 17:2-4 And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, (17:3) explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.” (17:4) And some of them were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a great many of the devout Greeks and not a few of the leading women.

It is right and good to defend the faith. But, we must understand that the right heart behind this is always the salvation of the lost. With that, let’s get started.

***Presuppositional Apologetics***

First up is presuppositional apologetics. I purposefully chose to work through this first because it is fresh in our minds.

According to an online source (Wikipedia) the definition of Presuppositional Apologetics or Presuppositionalism is:

“A school of Christian apologetics that believes the Christian faith is the only basis for rational thought. It presupposes that the Bible is divine revelation and attempts to expose flaws in other worldviews. It claims that apart from presuppositions, one could not make sense of any human experience, and there can be no set of neutral assumptions from which to reason with a non-Christian.”

Scripture makes claims about the creation and man. It teaches us that God created the world and that God is not dependent upon the creation in any way. Scripture also teaches us that those who are in sin are actively suppressing the truth of God.

Have you ever been in a pool and tried to hold a ball under the water? When we do this, we suppress the ball; we try to hold it under the water, but to do this we must constantly be holding it down. What happens when you shift too far to the right or to the left? Or, what happens when you let the ball go? It explodes into the air! This is the same way the unbeliever treats the truth about God, they suppress it actively like trying to hold the ball under the water.

Because they are suppressing the truth of God, and because they are dead in their sin and incapable of seeking God, they are not capable of perceiving true knowledge. Yes, they think & reason because they are made in the image of God. But they are not capable of understanding true knowledge.

Prov 2:6 For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;

Prov 1:7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Prov 15:14 ​The heart of him who has understanding seeks knowledge, but the mouths of fools feed on folly.

True knowledge hears what the Lord says in His word and submits to it. Folly does not.

Presuppositionalism understands that your theology must come first, and the gospel must be the foundation. What we believe about God should shape how we talk to an unbelieving world. Thus, because Scripture teaches us that the nonbeliever is dead in sin and suppressing the truth in unrighteousness, we aim to NOT prove to them that God exists with evidence. We aim to not prove to them that Christianity is the most reasonable religion or that Christ really did rise from the dead. No, we aim to point out the flaws in their worldview by showing them that they have built their foundation on utter foolishness, “suppressing the truth.”

There are a few reasons why we don’t start with evidence. 1st When we give the unbeliever evidence we declare them to have the ability to know truth apart from God. The scriptures are clear this is not the case. If you’ve given up God you do not possess the ability to decide on your own as the ultimate standard anything about God. 2nd We don’t start with evidence because everyone will view the very same evidence through their presuppositions. This is how two people can look at the same evidence and arrive at a different conclusion. We must start with presuppositions to show the unbeliever that they are internally inconsistent (this is something they can see even without true knowledge). We do this again with the ultimate desire of showing them why they are inconsistent and taking that reality to show and share the gospel. They are inconsistent because they are made in Gods image and cannot escape that truth, this is a perfect Segway to the Gospel!

We show the nonbeliever that the very reason & logic they claim to use and depend on, without God, is foolishness. Christians submit to the triune God. God is all knowing, all wise, He does not lie, He does not change. You can have no uniformity in nature without the one true God. Uniformity in nature is the principle that all laws in nature continue without change, they are uniform. Did you get out of bed this morning worried that you would fall upwards? No. We are conditioned to rely on uniformity. We don’t doubt the laws of the universe that God has established.

Because the nonbeliever suppresses the truth and cannot know everything in all time, they do not know whether reason will work the same way today as it did yesterday or tomorrow. It’s a giant guessing game. It’s a vicious cycle.

The presuppositionalist understands that the end goal of defending the faith is ultimately the proclamation of the gospel. We aim to show them the futility of their worldview to present them with the gospel. The gospel is the ordained means by which God is able to rescue us from our blindness.

We must understand that if we’re just in it to argue, we’ve missed the boat. Our goal is not winning an argument. Our goal is evangelism.

We see this in Romans 10:14 & 17

(10:14) How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

(10:17) So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Remember, the nonbeliever has built his beliefs on foolishness because he claims to ascertain that, at minimum, God *may* not exist or, at maximum, that God *definitely* doesn’t exist. The nonbeliever has no mechanism by which he/she could possibly defend that truth claim. Any logical assertion or position is a truth claim that must be verified by ones’ worldview.

If I were to ask a Christian if God exists, he/she says something along the lines of: Yes. God has revealed to me the glorious truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ through His Divine Revelation and our ultimate standard, Scripture.

But, if I were to ask a nonbeliever if God exists, he/she may say: No. We’ve evolved from star dust that eventually formed into a planet, which spontaneously created life from chaos. Life started in a primitive form and evolved into fully functioning and advanced organisms through random chance over 4.5 billion years. I believe these things through empiricism or rationalism.

The worldview is drastically different.

***What is the truth?***

The goal of presuppositional apologetics is to point out the inconsistency of the nonbeliever’s worldview and then provide them with the gospel. We don’t need to wow them with fancy evidences because the truth of Scripture teaches us that they will reject those evidences! They are unable to see the truth of Scripture until God regenerates their hearts and they trust in Christ for salvation!

We need to communicate this:

All men have sinned:

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

The sinful man rejects God:

Psalm 14:1 The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none who does good.

They do not seek Him:

Romans 3:11 No one understands; no one seeks for God.

Sinful man needs to be regenerated by God in order to be saved:

John 3:3 Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Salvation is only through Christ:

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

We must hear or have the gospel communicated to us in order to respond to it:

Romans 10:17 So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

The Holy Spirit regenerates our hearts if He wills:

Titus 3:5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,

Romans 9:16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

We respond in faith, which is also a gift of God:

Acts 16:31 And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Romans 10:9 because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Eph 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, (2:9) not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

As you can see from these texts, it is quite simple. The foolish deny the existence of God. Those in their sin – they do not seek God. And, we must be quick to point all sinners to the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

***Evidential Apologetics***

Let’s move on to our second school of apologetics, evidential apologetics.

According to an online source (Wikipedia) the definition of evidential apologetics or evidentialism is:

“An approach to Christian apologetics emphasizing the use of evidence to demonstrate that God exists. The evidence is supposed to be evidence both the believer and nonbeliever share, that is to say one need not presuppose God's existence.”

So, if presuppositional apologetics is the defense of the faith whereby we pre-suppose or assume that the person we’re giving a defense of the faith to is un-able to discern truth and assent to salvation, then evidential apologetics is the opposite.

The evidential apologist shares evidences with non-believers in order to get them to ascent to God. The practical outworking of these ideas show that there is a big rift between evidential apologists and presuppositional apologists when it comes to theology.

Evidential apologists tend to believe in Synergism or Arminianism.

According to an online source (Wikipedia) the definition of synergism is the ‘position of those who hold that salvation involves some form of cooperation between divine grace and human freedom.’

Synergists wrongly interpret the Scriptures and thus arrive at the conclusion that God only saves those who, of their own supposed freewill, place their faith in God.

We’ve spoken on this topic a lot at Disciples Church, but I’ll give a quick run-down.

This theological position believes that the scriptures teach that election is conditional based upon what man does apart from God’s sovereign work. It also teaches that Christ’s atonement was for all, and that God’s grace is resistible. They believe that grace is prevenient, that is, when Jesus died he covered all people everywhere with a type of grace that allows them to come to Him in faith, but it does not guarantee that they will do so. Many who hold this position also believe that man is not enslaved to and totally dead in sin. The Arminian position believes that man can will himself out of being saved, despite God’s desire to keep him.

In contrast, our church is mongeristic in our view of salvation, understanding the historic Christian confessions and creeds to be accurate in interpretation of Scripture on these matters. We believe that election is unconditional, based on God’s will alone. That is, that man does not influence God’s choice in election at all. We believe that saving grace is not able to be resisted. When God decides to save a person, we cannot and do not say no. We believe that grace is only applied to those for whom Jesus died. When Jesus died, he only shed His blood for the elect. He did not atone for all people as that would assume that all people would be saved. We believe that man is absolutely enslaved and dead in sin, desperate of God’s sovereign effective saving grace. And, finally, that God will lose none that He has truly saved; A redeemed person is eternally God’s adopted child.

The evidentialists believe that the non-believing man is capable of hearing the evidence for God, the resurrection, and whatever else they want to provide evidence for. They believe that the person, of their own so-called free-will, is able to think properly and assent to putting their faith in Jesus.

But, as we’ve already covered, the natural man is not capable of seeing, hearing or perceiving true saving knowledge. They are spiritually blinded to these truths apart from God’s intervening, sovereign grace.

According to scripture, man is not the initiator or due the credit in being saved. Man is unable to trust God in and of himself. Thus, we are presuppositional in our apologetic. We hold up the Word of God first and that is our foundation. Evidentialists, while many of them are truly Christians who uphold the Scriptures as the Word of God, incorrectly assume that man is capable of assenting to salvation in and of themselves, through critical thinking and thought. We must understand what the scriptures say about man in his natural state.

There truly is a great chasm between presuppositionalist apologists and evidentialist apologists. There is a fundamental disagreement on doctrine and theology.

Quickly, let’s look at what scripture says of the natural man. Paul says this in Romans 3:10-18:

(3:10) “None is righteous, no, not one; (3:11) no one understands; no one seeks for God. (3:12) All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” (3:13) ​“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” (3:14) ​“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” (3:15) ​“Their feet are swift to shed blood; (3:16) in their paths are ruin and misery, (3:17) and the way of peace they have not known.” (3:18) ​“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

As you can see from the savage imagery in this text, man is utterly destitute in his sin. And, as Jesus highlights in raising Lazarus from the dead in John 11, there is no will on behalf of Lazarus that brought him from the grave. It was all the act of God.

***Is evidentialism pointless?***

But I want to ask this question, is evidentialism pointless? No. It is not. Evidence is great for the Christian, but not effective for the nonbeliever. The purpose of evidence is not to convince the nonbeliever to put their faith in and trust in God, as if they could do that – no, the purpose of evidence is to bolster and embolden our own faith in God.

Evidentialism may deal with textual criticism or reliability of the Biblical text. Many on the teaching team have been blessed by Dr. James White’s work in this area. In this work he aims to show how over the centuries the Biblical text is reliable and how we should deal with discrepancies in the copies of the various manuscripts.

These sorts of teachings are extremely beneficial! But, what is their purpose? Are they meant to give us more faith or are they meant to convince the unbelieving world to believe? They are meant for the church. Evidentialism has greatly helped us see the majesty and wonder of our God.

***Don’t argue the evidence.***

When we get into the method of how to actually present a defense of the faith, we will delve into this more deeply, but let me briefly touch on this point.

It’s tempting for all of us when defending the faith to jump to evidences. But, when we do so, we forget what the scriptures say about the natural man who lives in sin. He is unable to discern the truth and what he needs most is a clear and coherent unpacking of the gospel.

And furthermore, when the evidentialist gives evidence to prove God, they place the nonbeliever on the throne to judge God. That is wholly inappropriate to do. Man does not judge God. God judges man.

Often this attempt is well meant, we would not say that those who give evidence are ill willed. We simply want to show you that it is a misguided aim. This is not to say that God has not saved people through this practice, God can strike a straight blow with a crooked stick. However, we should not use crooked sticks when we have a solid understanding of the word of God. Many people have gone to evidence because the unbelieving culture at large requests us to meet them on their standard. Many times this looks like, “I don’t believe in your God or the bible so prove to me that it’s true without using it.” This sound logical, but essentially, they have asked you to abandon your worldview and take theirs up to argue with them. This is foolishness! If you lay down your only source of truth to try and argue for truth, then you have become the fool and are answering them according to their folly.

Proverbs 26:4 Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.

You see, when you take up the worldview of the unbeliever you meet him on his ground and give up ultimate truth. You become like him and are arguing for something he cannot even begin to understand.

Now I know there’s more to that passage in Proverbs, but we will dive into that more in coming lessons. For now, I must leave the carrot dangling in front of you!

***Conclusion***

Finally, I pray that as we discuss these topics, we would not be boastful in our knowledge. It is true that Christians are capable of understanding knowledge in a truly deep and profound way. But when we let this knowledge become a sense of pride, we miss opportunities to really live out the display of grace. We must be embodiments of the gospel, not just showing people how a Christian life is different, but also providing the world with the distinctiveness of Christian in belief and thought.

Let’s pray.