

Circularity and Christian Apologetics

Do we prove the Bible from the Bible? Are Christians using circular reasoning when they employ an internal defense of Scripture?

By Jay Wegter

Does the Bible's 'self-attestation' constitute circular reasoning?

We begin with the premise that the circularity employed in defending Scripture is not the same kind of circularity employed by the unbeliever in defending his erroneous worldview.

The unbeliever's circularity is flawed. A worldview cannot validate itself because it is made up of presuppositions (assumptions/core commitments) which are taken on faith. A worldview is like a scale that weighs things; but the scale can't weigh itself. When it comes to validating itself, there still must be a standard by which the internal weights of the scale are calibrated.

The natural man's reasoning processes may be compared to a pair of "faulty scales" (Grover Gunn, *A comparison of Apologetic Methods*, pp., 3-4). It is useful to the Christian apologist to know that the unbeliever's "scales" are not in working order! In this analogy the "scales" are analogous to one's *world view*. All information that a person encounters is *interpreted* by means of his world view. The scales are utilized to validate everything except one thing—they cannot weigh themselves!

God has given to every man "weights" that are accurately stamped. They are stamped *internally* by reason of the fact that all men bear the *image of God*. Every person has an innate knowledge that he is made in the image of an almighty Creator—the law of God is written upon man's heart (Rom 2:14-15).

The God-given "weights" are also stamped *externally*. The whole creation that surrounds man gives inescapable daily evidence of the power, wisdom, and majesty of its Creator (Ibid., p. 5-7). In order to avoid the indelible stamp that God has put upon these "weights," the natural man constructs a *fantasy view* of reality that flows from his own mind. As a consequence, the unbeliever's 'scales' do not "weigh" accurately. "Issues that should carry great weight [the Creator's absolute claims on the creature] have no weight at all on the scales of unbelief" (Ibid, p. 13).

In essence, the unbeliever is "pressing a depraved thumb upon the scales." The unbeliever cannot get an accurate reading upon his scales because he has set aside the authoritative claims of God, Christ, and Scripture. Because the apologist is armed with an understanding of the unbeliever's reasoning processes, *he will not* suggest for a moment that the unbeliever's scales are in working order. His argument at many junctures will confront the unbeliever's world view – "Hey, get your thumb off of those scales! You're cheating!" (Ibid, pp. 14-15).

When the Christian apologist keeps asking the question, "And why is that true?" He is actually 'drilling down' deep enough to hit core assumptions which are taken on faith. These core assumptions are commonly offered as 'proofs' of one's life view—but in reality, they are self-referential. DISCUSSION: What are the problems encountered when one seeks to employ a 'self-referential' 'proof' for one's life view? In other words, how can a scale 'weigh itself' for accuracy? What is needed determine its accuracy?)

The circularity used in proving the Bible differs from all other kinds of circularity (John Whitcomb).

It is common for Christians to be accused of circular reasoning when they seek to prove the Bible from the Bible. But is that circular reasoning in the classical sense? The presuppositional apologist must know why the Bible's self-attestation is not to be equated with the world's use of circular reasoning.

A frequent refrain in the debate between believer and unbeliever is the plea for neutrality as 'fairness'. Debating parties are urged to begin at a point of neutrality. But is it possible to begin reasoning without an ultimate starting point? Not really.

When a Christian debates a philosophic naturalist; often little is really accomplished. Facts and 'purported facts' fly about. But in reality little contact is made—both are arguing from their respective starting points. In a way it is like a contest between a whale and an elephant. Lots of thrashing takes place; but there is no conquest. The two beasts live in completely different realms—land and sea!

The real work of providing an internal critique of the unbeliever's worldview only takes place when the Christian ceases to debate over the meaning of certain facts; and begins to expose the unbeliever's faulty epistemology (in other words; show the unbeliever that the 'scales' of his worldview cannot weigh themselves). As Cornelius VanTil has so accurately stated, the debate is really an epistemological debate—a debate over the source of authoritative knowledge.

The circularity employed in defending Scripture is inseparable from its sufficiency

If the Christian moves over to neutrality in order to get a hearing—he is actually taking a stand against the sufficiency of Scripture. To concede neutrality is to step onto the apostate turf of "*nobody knows for sure.*" God has given general revelation to overturn "*nobody knows for sure.*" All men are rendered accountable by God's general revelation (Rom 1:18-23). Chaos and chance do not write immensely sophisticated and complex codes and programs such as DNA.

General revelation (God's revelation in the created order; and in the conscience) renders all men guilty; without excuse (Rom 1:20). Thus, how one treats general revelation (God's infallible revelation in the creation) totally conditions how one treats special revelation (God's infallible revelation—the inscripturated Word of God).

To concede or grant a neutral starting point is to deny that the Bible is the ultimate epistemological foundation for belief—and for authority in all other areas. What in the universe is more certain than the Bible? The Word of God will NOT defer to a more authoritative standard than itself. DISCUSSION: Defend the statement above—namely that a neutral starting point denies that God speaking in His Word is the ultimate epistemological foundation for belief. What is the role of General Revelation—why has God given it?

The assumptions of the Enlightenment now govern the world's epistemology

The assumptions of anti-supernaturalism are antithetical to divine revelation. Out of the Enlightenment came the idea that science would replace religion as the guardian of truth

(see the definitions of *scientism* and *positivism*). Modernity celebrates autonomous reason—the idea that reason and rationality can operate accurately—giving an accurate picture of the world and of man apart from divine revelation). Darwin pitted objective empirical science against religion and myth.

Western culture, having abandoned God’s absolutes, utilizes the distorted lens of naturalism to interpret the facts of God’s creation. The result is futility. Man has abrogated the epistemological authority that belongs to the Word of God alone. Philosophic naturalism is the academy’s preferred pseudo-universal by which it attempts to correlate and interpret all facts and phenomena.

Is human reason the ‘common ground’ we have with the unbeliever?

Dr. Mike Vlach, Professor of Apologetics at The Master’s Seminary provides the following answers: Some believe that assuming the truth and authority of the Bible is intellectually dishonest. In fact, some would say that it is circular reasoning to assume the Bible’s authority when telling people they need to obey the Bible. Instead, shouldn’t we use reason to prove the authority of the Bible?

Reason is not the common ground upon which the believer should try to make contact with the unbeliever. Unbelievers possess an epistemic bias is to twist God’s truth for their purposes since they are truth suppressors.

Granting human reason as “common ground” means granting the unbeliever autonomy in using his human reason to determine whether he/she should believe in the God of the Bible or not. The Bible does not grant this right to the unbeliever. The unbeliever is called to repent and believe the Gospel.

It is not as though presuppositionalists are the only ones assuming an ultimate presupposition. Everyone has ultimate presuppositions that cannot be “proven.” Whenever anyone argues for the truth of something, they are assuming something. As Frame states, “Everyone else reasons the same way. Every philosophy must use its own standards in proving its conclusions; otherwise, it is simply inconsistent” (Frame, *AGG*, 10). *DISCUSSION: Address the common notion held by Christian ‘integrationist’ apologists who subscribe to the idea that human reason (when it agrees with Scripture) helps establish the veracity of the Bible. Do you see any error in holding to the concept that human reason ‘shares’ authority with the Word of God in determining what is true, real, right, and wrong? According to Scripture, is reason an ethically neutral faculty in man? Or is human reason the capacity for ‘understanding’ and receiving truth from God—thus making this faculty a place of ethical or unethical thinking depending upon its relation to the truth? (NOTE: God planted understanding in man in order that man might receive divine revelation and thereby have a relationship with Him (Job 38:36; Ps 94:8-11).*

Why should we assume the Christian worldview in order to defend the Christian worldview?

The Bible is its own ultimate criterion for truth. John Frame reminds us that every philosophical system uses its own standard in proving its conclusions; otherwise it would be inconsistent. Key to our understanding is to grasp the following:

When arguing for an ultimate criterion; one must use criterion compatible with that conclusion. Vlach notes this as well, “Assuming the truth of Christianity is not a

vicious circular argument. As Frame puts it, ‘the rational basis for faith is God’s own rationality. The sequence is: God’s rationality → human faith → human reasoning. The arrows may be read ‘is the rational basis for’ (Frame in Cowan, 210). Thus, the sequence is linear, not circular.”

Greg Bahnsen’s comments are also helpful. There are necessary conditions for truth which are inseparable from absolute truth itself. These conditions **MUST** be argued with the ultimate truth. God, as set forth in Scripture is transcendent. Thus, we will find Him **ONLY** by the conditions consistent with His transcendence. Those conditions are *dependency upon His infallible self-revelation*. You can’t look for God the way you’d look for crackers in the cupboard (Greg Bahnsen, *Bahnsen vs. Stein Debate*).

Wegter also notes, “If you set out to map the Himalayas with a pad of paper, a flashlight, and a 12 inch ruler—you would fail on a grand scale. Why? Because the magnitude of what you are seeking to map and measure is infinitely larger than your tools and your vantage point. So also, the God of Scripture cannot be known or found by the inadequate tools of human reason and empiricism.” *DISCUSSION: Discuss the following concept: is man able to set aside God as the source of human rationality and then successfully invent his own basis for rationality? Include in your discussion why our Creator’s rationality is the source of our own. Include in your discussion that the necessary conditions for knowledge are in God alone—a universe based on chance and chaos can not be the source of rationality.*

Ultimate intellectual criteria for truth must involve circularity

“Although appealing to the Bible as the ultimate epistemological foundation for belief may sound simplistic and naïve to some (as well as unpersuasive) . . . this is the key to maintaining the full sufficiency and authority of Scripture. Not only does God *not* call Christians to put the authority of His Word ‘on the shelf’ while they argue for Christianity, but doing so will deny the very thing they are setting out to prove, namely, that God’s Word should be the authority over *every* area of thought (including apologetics)” (Michael J. Kruger in Vlach, “The Sufficiency of Scripture in Apologetics,” *TMSJ* 12/1 Spring 2001: 70).

To deny circularity when it comes to an ultimate presupposition leads to an infinite regress of reasons

“To deny circularity when it comes to an ultimate authority is to subject oneself to an infinite regress of reasons. If a person holds to a certain view, A, then when A is challenged he appeals to reasons B and C. But, of course, B and C will certainly be challenged as to why they should be accepted, and then the person would have to offer D, E, F, and G, as arguments for B and C. And the process goes on and on.

Obviously it has to stop somewhere because an infinite regress of arguments cannot demonstrate the truth of one's conclusions. Thus, every worldview (and every argument) must have an ultimate, unquestioned, self-authenticating starting point.

Another example: Imagine someone asking you whether the meter stick in your house was actually a meter long. How would you demonstrate such a thing? You could take it to your next-door neighbor and compare it to his meter stick and say, "See, it's a meter." However, the next question is obvious, "How do we know your neighbor's meter stick is really a meter?" This process would go on infinitely unless there were an ultimate

meter stick (which, if I am not mistaken, actually existed at one time and was measured by two fine lines marked on a bar of platinum-iridium alloy). It is this ultimate meter stick that defines a meter.

When asked how one knows whether the ultimate meter stick is a meter, the answer is obviously circular: The ultimate meter stick is a meter because it is a meter. This same thing is true for Scripture. The Bible does not just happen to be true (the meter stick in your house), rather it is the very criterion for truth (the ultimate meter stick) and therefore the final stopping point in intellectual justification” (Kruger in Vlach, 81, n. 31). DISCUSSION: Of course the above relates back to Webster’s definition of truth, “that which has fidelity to an original.” Explain why God in Christ is the ‘Original’. Discuss why reasoning without presuppositions is impossible.

What are some of the ways Biblical circularity differs from the world’s flawed logic?

- We presuppose the Christian Worldview in our apologetic because of the impossibility of the contrary (*chaos* cannot produce the pre-conditions of knowledge—i.e. logic, morality, correspondence between one’s mind and the world, uniformity in nature, and science).
- The Word of God proclaims God to be the only authoritative vantage point for all reality. God structures all reality—He is the ontological reference point for all reality. Truth and reality meet eternally in the mind of God. To presuppose the authority of self-attesting Scripture is inseparable from holding to the sufficiency of God’s Word.
- Human reason cannot be the final reference point for all reality (finite man cannot provide the universals necessary to bring unity to particulars). (In the schema of autonomous reason, truth and reality do not cohere with one another; nor do they have comprehensive meaningful contact.)
- The ‘circle’ scribed by the Word of God encompasses all reality and accounts for all reality. Inside the ‘circle of reality’ scribed by God’s revelation is God’s authoritative condemnation of all lying worldviews. Therefore, you can tell the unbeliever that God has something to say about his worldview! Also inside the circle of God’s revelation is God’s infallible word about angels, demons, the elect, the reprobate, history, creation, the new creation, the kingdom of light, and the kingdom of darkness (John C. Whitcomb Jr., *Contemporary Apologetics*).
- Only the Word of God perfectly correlates with human experience—only the Word of God is the ‘key’ which fits the lock of universe. General revelation and special revelation are in total agreement. This refutes the error that one worldview is as good as another.
- The Word of God is self-attesting—it is God’s self-revelation (note that Christ’s self-attestation was the basis of His authority claims during His discourses).

- God created man with the capacity to recognize God's truth the moment he sees it. Man is without excuse because the knowledge of God has been "made evident" to all men—the doctrine of general revelation (Romans 1:18-23).
- The sinner is totally unable to make sense of himself, of God, or of this world apart from the Christian worldview. Through erroneous worldviews, sinners suppress the very worldview they need to make sense of the world.
- Christ died for the church—to give His redeemed true knowledge. He died to give us 'the mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2:16). Therefore to reject the Word of Christ is to reject Him both as Savior and as 'Interpreter of the world'.

DISCUSSION: Take the above reasons for 'biblical circularity' and turn them into a sample apologetics dialog with an unbeliever (role play).

Is presuppositional apologetics the only apologetic methodology which utilizes a presuppositional starting point?

Dr. Vlach has compiled a fitting response: "[I]t is not as though presuppositionalists are 'assuming' its starting point while other apologetic approaches are not. Everyone has an ultimate starting point. Unlike others, presuppositionalists are up front about what their ultimate presupposition is."

Ex. Those who believe that **human reason** is the ultimate authority in all matters (*rationalism*) must assume that human reason is the ultimate authority.

Ex. Those who believe that **experience** (*empiricism*) is the ultimate authority in all matters must assume that experience is the ultimate authority.

"The point is that when one is arguing for an ultimate criterion, whether Scripture, the Koran, human reason, sensation, or whatever, one must use criteria compatible with that conclusion. If that is circularity, then everybody is guilty of circularity" (Frame, *AGG*, 10).

"... [P]resuppositions are inescapable, so the issue becomes one of their **validity or invalidity**. The presuppositionalist therefore is concerned with the task of deriving his assumptions from the Scriptures" (George Zemek in Vlach, 9).

DISCUSSION: Since the unbeliever 'pretends' that he has no presuppositions—how would our worldview questions be useful in exposing the unbeliever's core assumptions? Why would it be extremely valuable (from the standpoint of Christian apologetics) to show the unbeliever the radical contrast between his professed beliefs and the Word of God?