

## **Introduction – Book Review: Five Views on Apologetics - Gundry And Cowan**

**By Brian A Schulz**

The thought provoking collection of ideas pieced together by editors Stanley Gundry and Steven Cowan appropriately titled *Five Views on Apologetics* brings to mind the colloquial saying, “there is more than one way to skin a cat.” This work brings together some of the greatest thinkers in contemporary Christianity. In doing so, these editors have set up a very interesting clash of ideas on the topic of Apologetic Method. These thinkers would say that there is indeed more than one way to skin a cat, but would quickly point out that ‘their way’ was the best.

The Five Views which are included in this work are; The Classical View purported by William Lane Craig, The Evidentialist View supported by Gary R. Habermas, The Cumulative View explained by Paul D. Feinberg, The Presuppositional View detailed by John M. Frame, and The Reformed Epistemology View argued by Kelly James Clark. The book is laid out in such a way that each gentleman proceeds to construct a case for their own point of view and his opponent then have a small section to respond to said view. This structure is a very favorable skeleton for anyone studying a given topic such as Apologetic Method. It is therefore the goal of this review to briefly examine each view while highlighting sections from the opposing critiques and eventually settle on which method is indeed the ‘best way to skin a cat.’

### **The Classical Method**

Noted philosopher and apologist William Lane Craig sets out in this chapter to make the case for the Classical Method of Apologetics. Craig sums up the crux of his exposition;

We have seen that a proper understanding of apologetic methodology involves making a fundamental distinction between our knowing and our showing Christian theism to be true. We know that our Christian beliefs are true because they are properly basic,

warranted belief grounded in our veridical experience of the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.<sup>1</sup> The bulk of Craig's chapter focused on the role of Holy Spirit in knowing Christian theism to be true. His thesis is that inner witness of the Spirit is the most convincing element of Christian faith. He relates throughout this chapter about his own experience in and among his college days. Craig sums up, "It was the testimony of Christ's spirit within me that gave the fundamental assurance that my faith was true; and my refusal to give this up in the face of potential defeaters was not a *sacrificium intelluctus* but was wholly in accord with the deliverances of reason."<sup>2</sup>

Craig settled in the Classical camp due to the fact that he strongly believes that the 'two-step' approach of apologetics is necessary. This two-step approach first involves the use of natural theology to establish theism and then moves to the presentation of historical evidences, the trust worthiness of scripture, et cetera to show that Christianity is the best version of theism.<sup>3</sup> One of the most prominent arguments that Craig employs is the Kalam Cosmological argument for the existence of God. Once Craig has employed this method among other in this realm he then would be able to move on to the evidences mentioned above.

It is in this explanation of the internal witness of the spirit that Craig's opponents find the most fertile soil for rebuttal. Feinberg, the cumulative proponent, attacks this position with some very poignant statements. Craig more or less claims in his essay that the witness of the Spirit is self authenticating and is therefore unable to be unseated by a defeater. Feinberg counters, "There are many Christians who believe that the Holy Spirit has led them to believe and do things that turn out to be false."<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say, "However, there seems to come a point at

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley N. Gundry and Steven B. Cowan; *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 70.

which the witness of the Spirit may be misunderstood, which is simply to say that even believers do not have infallible knowledge of their faith.”<sup>5</sup> Taking a step back in this discussion one could ask Craig, where did he get the idea that the Spirit even existed in the first place? The role of the Bible in the whole scheme of things seems to be set to the side. Presuppositionalist John Frame hones in on this dynamic. He explains, “The Spirit testifies to *words* that he has given to the apostles. The same is the case in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians 1:5 and 2:13. Indeed, I know of no passage in which the Spirit’s witness has any object other than the Word.”<sup>6</sup> Frame would suggest that assurance of salvation comes from the promises of Scripture. He goes on to deal with the concept of knowing and showing. Frame states, “In both knowing and showing, our witness should be based on the norms of God’s Word and the objective evidence of God’s revelation in nature, history, and Scripture. We should then trust the Spirit to bear witness to our message.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The Evidentialist Method**

The Evidential Method laid out by Gary Habermas has many things in common with the classical method. However, the main difference is that Evidentialist use the available evidence, such as miracles, and work forward to the truth of Christian Theism but they also work backward and use the same ideas to show the existence of God. The evidentialist will focus heavily on historical and other inductive arguments to convince the skeptic or encourage the believer.

Habermas sums up:

First, I have said that the chief interest of this method is the postulating and developing of historical evidences (one species of propositional data) for the Christian faith. This is its single, major contribution to the issue. Not only is it thought that these evidences provide the best means of deciding between the theistic systems of belief, but also that they can be utilized as an indication of God’s existence and activity.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 74-75.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 94.

It seems that Habermas, like many in Christendom, believes that regeneration occurs prior to salvation in and through the process of illumination. This foundational idea would affect how he approaches theological and apologetic issues. Habermas states this on the issue of sin and regeneration:

Forth, it is impossible to force anyone into the kingdom of God by our use of logic and/or evidences. The reality of sin separates persons from God and plays a monumental role in how God's truth is viewed by the unbeliever (Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 2:14). Human agency is not responsible for regeneration. Apart from God's influence, conversion will never take place.<sup>9</sup>

This quote has a deeply Calvinistic flavor. The concepts of total depravity and illumination seem to be at the foundation of this statement. If this is indeed the case, then it makes human agency in the matter a muddled matter. This author agrees that human agency is not responsible for regeneration but would say that human agency in almost all cases is a key factor in leading someone to the point in time when regeneration takes place, i.e. the waters of baptism. This author would say that logic and evidences play a major role in doing so.

Feinberg in his retort states that his approach is very much the same as the evidentialist method but with a few key additions. He explains:

To Habermas's argument I have added characteristics of the universe in which we live; its contingency and orderliness; the experience of God's presence and a relationship with Him, which many claim to have had; the existence of moral law; a revelation that claims to come from God; and prophecies that are contained in this revelation that are fulfilled.<sup>10</sup>

Much of Feinberg's reply is in agreement with Habermas's approach. On the other hand, Craig goes into much detail to show that miracles, which are the crux of the evidentialist approach, do not offer a sufficient explanation for a starting point in apologetic method. All in all it seems that the evidentialist approach has many positives, but may be limited in scope in certain apologetic situations.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 131.

## **The Cumulative Method**

The cumulative method sets out piece together all the available subjective and objective arguments placing them cumulatively into one convincing explanation. Feinberg sums up his position:

This, then, is the case for Christianity. It is a broad-based argument with many subjective and objective elements. They require some explanation and in some cases can be seen as reinforcing one another to strengthen the case for Christian Theism. The case is like a lawyer's brief. The claim is that Christianity theism is the most plausible explanation of all the evidence.<sup>11</sup>

This method seems on the surface to be a solid method that would appeal to the 'regular Joe.' The formal proofs that Craig offers have a needed place in academia, but to the regular person this alphabet soup would appear impressive but be difficult to understand. Most people have a basic understanding of the legal system and would gravitate to a method that would piece together evidence in such a fashion.

John Frame, a Presuppositionalist, highlights an important issue with the cumulative method:

Feinberg suggests seven tests of truth that should be applied within a cumulative case argument. Significantly, the most important test of truth within a Christian worldview, *scripturality*, is omitted, although Feinberg does sometimes mention Scripture among the data of which the debate must take account.<sup>12</sup>

In this system, it does appear that Scripture is just another piece of data, rather than the gold standard to which all other data is measured. For this author that is an important deficiency.

## **Presuppositional Method**

The presuppositional method defended by John Frame is a unique position among these contenders. It is clear that Frame while working within this method is also undergirded by the philosophic foundation of Calvinism, Original sin, depravity, et cetera. This dynamic flavors

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 197.

just about every aspect of Frame's chapter. That being said there are some interesting and valuable dynamics which can be harvested from these ideas. The first and most valuable idea is the concept of filtering everything through the Word. The Word as the gold standard and the ultimate trump card seems to be lost among the other 4 views where either philosophical argumentation or existential matters are elevated. God created man with the ability to reason and therefore expects that ability to be an important part of soteriology. Presuppositionalists seem to hone in on this dynamic in light of the Word.

All that said, there are quite a few difficulties which emerge with a Calvinistic foundation. The way in which one comes to faith is a key matter. If it is only by the grace of God which He chooses to impart then why evangelize at all? To say that the apologist is the tool in the hand of the Holy Spirit in this sense is right and wrong at the same time. It is true that the Holy Spirit could be involved in the process where the apologist is at work, but not the way that Frame and other Calvinist would suggest. Deeper philosophical issues are at play here including the issue of free will and determinism. These understandings are foundational to a correct apologetic approach. It would be interesting to see Frame's ideas through the filter of free will and free from the tyranny of this paradigm.

### **Reformed Epistemology Method**

The reformed epistemology method defended by Kelly James Clark is the most existential of the methods covered so far. The reformed method is closely linked to the presuppositional method in that Calvin looms large on the horizon. The reformed position could be summed up as such:

The reformed epistemologist will not necessarily eschew making positive arguments in defense of Christianity, but will argue that such arguments are not necessary for rational faith. If Calvin is right that human beings are born with an innate *sensus divinitatis*

(sense of the divine), then people may rightly and rationally come to have a belief in God immediately with the aid of evidence.<sup>13</sup>

Since this dynamic undergirds the whole philosophy of apologetics one wonders how evidence or other arguments come into play in any significant way. Habermas explain this from an evidentialist point of view:

Third, the absence of detailed positive (especially historical) evidences for Christian theism in Clark's approach makes me wonder how we can know that Christian theism is actually true. The seeming apathy towards positive evidences in Reformed apologetics, even in non-coercive, person relative context, makes me wonder how they fulfill a crucial component of apologetic methodology – arguing in favor of Christianity.<sup>14</sup>

This author would agree that both offensive and defensive arguments for Christianity are absolutely necessary in today's day and age. The reformed position like the presuppositional position have some glaring problems which stem from foundational misunderstanding on the nature of free will and sin.

### **Conclusion**

Having briefly detailed some of the major characteristics and objections to each view it is clear that each of these proponents have a deep love of Christ and for truth. Each of these scholars should be commended in their efforts to advance the Kingdom good. That being said, this author would like to suggest an alternative method. If it were to be termed in such a way as the other aforementioned methods is could be as such, the Integrationalist Method. It appears from this author's perspective that these five views have things a little off kilter. It seems that the focus of the apologetic method is centered on what the apologist believes is the best way. This author believes that to be a 'backwards' state of affairs; 'backwards' because the emphasis seems to be on the apologist and not the object of the apologist's efforts. If the goal is to reach

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 301.

the lost and to strengthen the found then shouldn't the object determine the method rather than the apologist predetermining a set path?

Allow for elaboration. Picture if you will non-belief and belief labeled on a continuum where any individual from the atheist to the devout Christian could be placed. In the estimation of this author it would seem the most beneficial for the object of the apologist to be approached according to where they are on this continuum. It really makes little sense to spend a great deal of time and effort to convince someone of something they already hold as part and parcel of their worldview. Likewise, it makes little sense to begin with matters that require a foundation if no foundation exists. Building foundation upon foundation or building the structure where no foundation exists seems to be counterproductive. In this author's opinion it would seem best to incorporate the best from these views and be able to use any and all at a given time in order to reach the individual where they are. The emphasis is placed upon the hearer – not the speaker.

All that said, this author believes that there is intrinsic value in each method (reformed to a much lesser degree) and it would behoove the discipler/apologist to be equipped with classical, evidential, cumulative, and presuppositional views. This, then, places the apologist in the position of correctly determining the state of the hearer(s) non-belief/belief. Once this has been determined then a specific strategy could be employed to most effectively reach the lost and strengthen the found. Peter spoke from the Old Testament Prophecies and Pentecost and Paul spoke from a cultural and philosophical position at Mars Hill in Athens. The question begs what if Peter employed Paul's method and Paul employed Peter's method in these unique arenas? What would have been the result? No one can know for sure, but it is clear the both Peter and Paul had in mind the object rather than a predetermined method. Their example rings true and far even to this day and age.