

Redeemer Bible Fellowship

“How to Defend the Faith”

Summer Series 2026

II. What is the condition of the unbeliever?

John Frame summarizes:

[Presuppositionalism] makes two basic assertions: (1) that human beings are obligated to presuppose God in all their thinking, and (2) that unbelievers resist this obligation in every aspect of thought and life. The first assertion leads [the apologist] to criticize the notion of intellectual autonomy; the second leads him to discuss the noetic effects of sin.¹

1. What does the Bible teach about the rational capabilities of the unbeliever?

- Mark 7:21—from the heart...come evil thoughts (reasonings);
- Rom 1:18-32—Bahnsen said:

First by nature, the unbeliever is the image of God, and therefore he is inescapably religious. His heart testifies continually to him, as does also the clear revelation of God around him that God exists and that he has a certain [divine] character. **Secondly**, the unbeliever exchanges the truth of God for a lie. He is a fool who refuses to begin his thinking with reverence for the Lord. He will not build on Christ's self-evidencing words. He will suppress the unavoidable revelation of God in nature. **Third**, because he delights not in understanding but chooses to serve the creature rather than the creator. The unbeliever is self-confidently committed to his own ways of thought, being convinced that he could not be fundamentally wrong. He flaunts perverse thinking and challenges the self-attesting word of God. Consequently, **fourthly**, the unbeliever's thinking results in ignorance. In his darkened, futile mind, he actually hates knowledge and can gain only a knowledge falsely so called...**Next**, the unbeliever's ignorance is nonetheless a culpable ignorance because he is excuseless for his rebellion against God's revelation. Hence, he is, as Paul says, without an apologetic for his thoughts [ie. their behavior is indefensible—Rom 1:20]. And **finally**, the unbelief of the unbeliever does not stem from a lack of factual evidence, but from his refusal to submit to the [revelation] of God from the beginning of his thinking.²

- Rom 2:15—even those who do not have God's revelation still have a conscience that provides a moral assessment, but cannot be trusted to operate consistently according to the truth;
- Rom 3:11 (par. Ps 14:2)—those in sin do not understand and do not seek God;
- I Cor 2:14—the one without the Holy Spirit does not receive the wisdom of God taught by the Spirit because that wisdom is folly to him and he lacks the ability to understand the spiritual significance or weightiness of it;
- Eph 2:3—those outside of Christ give into the evil impulses of the thoughts;
- Eph 4:17-19—unbelievers live with a futile mind, have darkened understanding or reasoning, possess an ignorance of the things of God due to a hardness towards those things.

¹ John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, ed. Joseph E. Torres (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 222.

² From an informal debate between Greg Bahnsen and R.C. Sproul in 1977 at RTS in Jackson, MS.
(<https://www.bahnseninstitute.com/bahnsen-and-sproul/>)

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Dr. Zemek succinctly summarizes these texts with the following statement, while initially quoting Eggleston:

The reason of man's mind still functions, but...always in opposition to God. Man still has some desire to investigate truth, but the corruption of the mind renders him incapable of the right way of investigating truth. Unless seen in relation to God and His Word, this reasoning only leads to further perversion...[Consequently,] Man's thinking and reasoning processes are consistently distorted in reference to the vital issues of life because of his spiritual heart disease.³

Based on these same texts, C.E.B. Cranfield rightly asserted that

the intellect is not a part of human nature somehow exempted from the general corruption and not something which can be appealed to as an impartial arbiter capable of standing outside the influence of the [self] and returning a perfectly objective judgment...The Christian should of course be aware, not just of such obvious facts as that judgment is often warped by self-interest and the processes of rational thought often exploited for base purposes, but also of the innumerable much more subtle ways in which the processes of thought are deflected, distorted and debilitated by the egotism of the thinker. The darkening to which this [condition] testifies means that, even at its best, the thinking of fallen men is never perfectly objective.⁴

2. What are common views regarding the rational capabilities of the unbeliever?

Here's how the classical/rationalist apologetical camp argues...

For their position:

As soon as reason realizes that there is a God, it immediately yields itself to that God, and honors him as the author of itself, unless the reasoner has a vested interest in suppressing this information, as sinful people do have. (R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur W. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 327.)⁵

If we consider common ground to mean a common perception and perspective of reality, then obviously no such common ground for discussion exists between believer and unbeliever. From the believer's vantage point every aspect of life, every bit of experience, every dimension of reality, is understood and interpreted from a theological perspective...It would appear that both [believer and unbeliever] enjoy [the same] understanding of the daffodil...[but] the believer acknowledges the significance of that daffodil, not as a cosmic accident, but as something that in itself bears witness to the majesty and beauty of the Creator God. This the unbeliever does not acknowledge, positing, instead, a completely opposite and antithetical understanding of the daffodil's significance. From a different perspective, however, there is common ground, namely the whole of creation. Believer and unbeliever live in the same universe. Each sees the same phenomena. The unbeliever and the believer can agree that two and two are four, and that certain principles of deduction are valid while others are invalid. Thus, a kind of common ground is established. (R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur W. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 70ff.)⁶

³ George J. Zemek, *Tethered to the Text: An Exegetical Approach to Apologetics* (Jupiter, FL: Expositors Press, 2024), 88, 83.

⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London; New York: T&T Clark Int'l, 2004), 1:118 & fn7.

⁵ Quoted in George J. Zemek, Jr., "A Review Article of Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense," *Grace Theological Journal* 7.1 (1986), 123.

⁶ Quoted in Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 232.

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Against presuppositionalism:

[Van Til] always assumes that the person who begins to examine the universe without presupposing the existence of the divine Lawgiver necessarily presupposes his own status as a lawgiver. That is by no means a necessary assumption of the person who begins by examining the data which he has at hand. . . They do not necessarily deny the divine being as Van Til insists that they do. People do not assert their autonomy against an initially known God as Van Til insists that they do. They simply operate according to human nature (R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur W. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 232ff.).⁷

Frame summarizes their view:

The Ligonier authors believe such certainty can be attained by appeal to certain “universal and necessary assumptions.” These are assumptions that, though sometimes challenged, cannot be regularly and consistently denied. Thus, they are prerequisites of science and, indeed, of all human life. (Sproul, Gerstner, Lindsley, 71) These are the law of noncontradiction, the “law of causality,” and “the basic reliability of sense perception.” Since these principles cannot be regularly and consistently denied, the book argues, they must be regarded as certain, along with any of their implications. Thus the authors try to show that Christianity is one of those implications: to deny Christianity is to deny one or more of those “universal and necessary assumptions.” Since we cannot deny those, Christianity must also be regarded as certain.⁸

3. What are biblical conclusions regarding the rational capabilities of the unbeliever?

John Frame:

So the difference between unregenerate and regenerate knowledge of God may be described as ethical. The unregenerate represses his knowledge of God by disobeying God. This disobedience might lead in some cases to psychological repression, or explicit atheism, but it does not always. The apologist should recognize, therefore, that the unbeliever’s problem is primarily ethical, not intellectual. He rejects the truth because he disobeys God’s ethical standards, not the other way around.⁹

Their problem is not intellectual weakness, but moral refusal to accept what is clearly revealed. Or, to put it more precisely, they do have intellectual problems, but ‘the intellectual problem is produced by the moral problem, not the moral problem by an intellectual one.’ They know God, but they do not know him savingly [nor will they submit to what they do know].¹⁰

⁷ Quoted in Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 231-232.

⁸ Quoted in Frame, 234.

⁹ Frame, 64.

¹⁰ Frame, 230.

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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. Our witness is either [based on] God’s wisdom or the world’s foolishness. There is nothing in between. Even if neutrality were possible, that route would be forbidden to us. When I oppose neutrality, what I oppose is appealing to something other than God’s revelation as the ultimate standard of truth...Neutrality [would necessitate] agreement on such things as worldview and epistemology.¹¹

Jim Halsey concurs as he presents the issue with piercing clarity:

When reason seeks to find an autonomous sphere for itself outside the contexts of God’s word, self-destruction will be the inevitable result...problems arise only when the reason attempts to shed its created character and attempts to transform itself into a timeless created logic. When this happens, reason establishes itself as an independent source of knowledge alongside revelation. Scripture’s absolute authority and epistemological necessity is thereby drastically minimized...[In conclusion,] At no point does man, acting upon his adopted principle of autonomy, interpret or discern anything correctly...[Therefore,] in the eyes of the presuppositionalist the Christian can, at no time, enter into a kind of theological-epistemological fraternization with the non-Christian.¹²

¹¹ Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 8, 9.

¹² Jim S. Halsey, *For a Time Such as This: An Introduction to the Reformed Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), 87, 88, 30, 4.