

Is Apologetics Counter-Productive? An Evaluation and Critique of Myron Penner's *The End of Apologetics*¹

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Abstract: *In The End of Apologetics, Anglican priest Myron Bradley Penner argues that the discipline of apologetics, especially rationalistic, evidentialist apologetics, is very much a fruitless enterprise. The purpose of this paper is twofold: one, to point out what I take to be the errors in Penner's position regarding the Christian apologetic endeavor. These errors concern the differences between Christian evidences and Christian "proofs;" the "secular" reasoning process versus the Christian reasoning process; and the pre-modern versus postmodern understandings of knowledge. My second goal is to show that much of what Penner advocates is actually useful for the apologist, and can be used to forge a more powerful apologetic presentation. Penner's emphasis on things like church tradition and personal experience of Christ can only add to, not diminish, the apologist's efforts.*

In *The End of Apologetics*, Anglican priest Myron Bradley Penner argues that the discipline of apologetics, especially rationalistic, evidentialist apologetics, is very much a fruitless enterprise. In fact, he goes as far as to say that Kierkegaard (from whom he takes his anti-apologetic starting point) may have been right when he suggested that apologetics was actually counter-productive, and, according to Penner, "apologetics *itself* might be the single biggest *threat* to genuine Christian faith that we face today."² Penner's argument is largely based on the oft-heard mantra that we live in a post-Enlightenment world, and that the very idea of using arguments to persuade people about religious truth is an approach that had validity in the Middle Ages, but not for us in the twenty-first century. There certainly is some truth to this charge. Some of the classical theistic arguments of, say, an Aquinas or an Anselm do not appeal to the modern mind in the same way they once did. Penner also has a point when he chastises Christian apologetics for having a tendency to devolve into "big business," with prominent apologists writing book after book, slogging it out on the lecture circuit, and endlessly engaging

¹ Myron Bradley Penner, *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2013).

² *Ibid.*, 12.

with the so-called New Atheists³ in public debates. Certain Christian apologists, like certain atheists, may come across as too cocksure, when in fact neither side can prove that their position is undoubtedly true. Penner is right again when he insists that apologetics sometimes tends to downplay the effectiveness of Christian witness and lifestyle as a tool for evangelism. Of course, most of today's theologically and biblically-trained apologists insist that there is more to spreading the gospel than rational argumentation, but sometimes the importance of maintaining a steady Christian witness through personal behavior can be obscured.

However, there are several points in Penner's thesis that I find problematic. One, most academically trained Christian apologists realize that they are offering *evidences*, not *proofs*, that Christianity is true. Penner admits this is the case, but does not, I think, take the distinction seriously enough. Two, Penner draws too sharp a distinction between "secular" reason and "religious" reason. Three, which is closely related to two, is that the evidentialist approach to apologetics that Penner rejects out of hand has deep roots in the Bible itself. Four, Penner is too quick to assume that the "modern" worldview has been replaced by the "postmodern" one. This may be true in the rarified ivory towers of academe, but it certainly is not true in the real world of everyday life, and this is where much of Christian apologetics is directed. Five, Penner objects to any type of apologetic that "tears down," rather than builds up. But this tearing down (i.e., "offensive" apologetics) has a distinguished pedigree in the Christian tradition. Six, Penner's rejection of evidentialism ultimately offers no way in which to adjudicate between rival religious truth-claims and must either lead him to religious pluralism or religious fideism. Finally, and more positively, Penner's position and that of evidentialists are not really contradictory, and in fact can be complementary. In fact, the combination of evidentialism with Penner's approach can

³The "unholy trinity," so to speak, are Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. See Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (Mariner Books, 2008), Dennett's *The Blind Watchmaker* (W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), and Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve, 2009).

present a powerful apologetic witness to the world that should satisfy Christians on both sides of the apologetic divide.

Why Does Penner Reject Apologetics?

For Penner, Christian apologetics are not really Christian at all, in that, for the apologist, “[w]hat is at the bottom of our Christian belief...is *not* a set of practices—a way of life, a confession, etc.,—but a set of propositional asseverations that can be epistemically justified. And *that* is what it means for them to have faith. It is little wonder that postmodernism is, as Lyotard reminds us, such a threat to modern apologists that they must do all they can do to stand against it.”⁴ If this were the case, I would be in full agreement with Penner, but I do not think that most apologists think the Christian message can be reduced to mere argumentation, as will be shown below. Penner’s second problem with apologetics is that, in adopting the logical weapons of modernity, it sells its theological soul in the process. Penner stands with Kierkegaard, whom Penner believes was not a fideist, as is sometimes alleged by his critics, but rather one who rejected “the entire modern epistemological paradigm that produces modern apologetics, because it attempts to ground faith in genius or secular reason. Modernity thereby empties faith of its Christian content and robs it of its authority.”⁵

Crucial to Penner’s apologetic program (if apologetic is the right word, given his disdain for the term), is what he calls the distinction between the “religious genius” and the “apostle.” The religious genius is someone like evidentialist William Lane Craig (Penner’s “opponent” throughout much of the book), who is able to intellectually defend the Christian faith. The apostle, however, is not a trained scholar, but rather someone called by God to deliver an authentic message from the Lord. Thus Penner writes,

⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵ Ibid., 58.

[a] genius is *born*, Kierkegaard points out, while an apostle is *called*. Whereas genius is a quality that distinguishes a person from other human beings comparatively—by being *more* rational or brilliant or intelligent—the apostle’s constitutive identity comes from the *call* of God. Subsequently, the apostle’s message is one that no one else can improve upon or add to because it is dependent on God’s action alone. . . . The apostolic message does not have authority because it is demonstrably rational or exceptionally brilliant but because *it is a word from God*.⁶

There is much truth here. The biblical prophets do indeed confront their hearers with the word of the Lord, and it is at their own peril that the listeners reject it. Penner firmly dismisses the idea that the apostle’s message is based on human reason. “However much human reason might be necessary to *understand* the apostolic proclamation (insofar as it qualifies as revelation), reason has no role to play whatsoever in *grounding* the apostle’s claims.”⁷

Penner does not rule out all appeals to objective evidence; he is not advocating an anything-goes approach to doctrine. But, he is against the idea that religious geniuses can present arguments that are objectively true for all Christians, in all places. As for the creeds and doctrines of the Church, Penner says they “are fallible, human expressions (interpretations) of the truths Christians have won for themselves in their various contexts.”⁸ Again, most would not argue too strenuously here with Penner. The creeds are imperfect attempts to capture the full truth of God, which is of course impossible for mortals. This also reflects Penner’s desire to shift away from a correspondence view of Christian truth (i.e., one that says Christian truth-claims are based on objectively true facts) to a view of Christian faith that is based on personal edification. Thus he says, “What matters about truth is that it builds me up, is true *for me*, and is the kind of thing that connects me to my deepest concerns as a self.”⁹ Penner is not advocating unbridled religious relativism here, though. For him, Christian edification is not purely subjective, but is

⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁷ Ibid., 52.

⁸ Ibid., 121.

⁹ Ibid., 110.

found within the Christian community itself, not in arguments about the objective truth of Christianity. Regarding “how Christian truth claims are verified, I find the issue is inextricably bound up with the nature of Christian truth-telling. The proof of Christian witness is always in the pudding. The pudding in this case is our *lives* as witnesses—our overall patterns of action and behavior (including our thoughts, feelings, and suppositions).”¹⁰

This is an important point, and one that I partially agree with. I will be returning to it at the end of this essay, in an attempt to join what Penner says here with what I perceive as the missing component (namely, evidentialist apologetics) in his approach. Where I do agree with him is when he stresses the importance of not having to choose objective truth over personally edifying, Christian community-based truth. Indeed, he claims that this avoidance of the one extreme or the other is at the very heart of his apologetic endeavor.¹¹

Do Christian Apologists Really Think They Can “Prove” Christianity Is True?

Penner does not insist that apologists believe they can prove every Christian doctrine beyond a doubt, but he thinks they come far too close to that position at times. But do modern apologists think Christian faith consists only of intellectual arguments? Blaise Pascal, though certainly not one of the modern apologists that Penner has in his sights, still captured the essence of what many modern apologists do. First, “he admitted that his argument fell short of absolute proof.”¹² This strain of thinking, I am going to argue, is present in virtually all modern apologists, especially William Lane Craig, particularly when we look at how he goes about setting forth the case for the historical reliability of the resurrection (more on this below).

Second, Pascal thought that intellectual arguments, though not foolproof, could still lead one to

¹⁰ Ibid., 124.

¹¹ Ibid., 129.

¹² James K. Beilby, *Thinking About Christian Apologetics: What It Is and Why We Do It* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2011), 68.

the practice of the faith, and provide an intellectually respectful reason for doing so, or at least a reason that prevented anyone “laughing at those who follow it.”¹³

It is my contention that modern apologists follow Pascal’s lead, and do not assume that apologetics provides proof that Christianity is true, as Penner implies when he says that apologists who defend the “objective, propositional truth of Christianity... believe humans grasp the full and complete truth about things as they really are.”¹⁴ For most apologists in Craig’s school of thought, they rely only on good evidence that *may* convince an open-minded person to take seriously the Christian message. John Warwick Montgomery, who in some ways can be seen as taking the apologetic mantle from C. S. Lewis and in the 1960’s and 1970’s paving the way for much of the evidentialist apologetics that would follow in succeeding generations, was fond of pointing out that apologetics offered evidence, not proof. For once outside the realms of mathematics and formal logic, we cannot really “prove” much at all¹⁵ (the shadow of Descartes looms large here of course). And Alister McGrath, commenting on Aquinas’s cosmological argument in its fivefold form, states “[n]ot for one moment does he [Aquinas] suggest that these arguments constitute *proofs* for the existence of God.”¹⁶ In fact, modern apologetics is not *only* about providing intellectual reasons that Christianity true. John G. Stackhouse, Jr., writing about the reasons people reject Christianity, puts some of the blame on poor Christian behavior, and insists that the Christian apologetic task

is to complement our proclamation of the gospel and our resistance to evil with winsome public demonstrations of God’s care for the earth, for the financially and socially needy, for beauty and joy, and for the intellectual life.... As valuable as theological and

¹³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. W.F. Trotter (New York: Dutton, 1958), 82, n 289.

¹⁴ Penner, *End of Apologetics*, 114.

¹⁵ See Montgomery’s helpful discussion of this matter in his *Human Rights and Human Dignity* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute for Law, Theology, and Public Policy, Inc., 1986).

¹⁶ Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don’t Need God and Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 37.

philosophical apologetics undoubtedly are, it seems unlikely that many people would consent to sitting still for them if all these other confirmations were absent.¹⁷

Are There Two Kinds of Reason, Secular and Biblical?

In his above-mentioned quotation, Penner says that modern apologists are wrong because they appeal to “secular reason” for their arguments. But I would suggest that there is only one kind of reason that God has endowed us with, *human* reason. Our faculties of reason do not change when we walk from a church into a laboratory. Our focus may be different, but we are still using the only mind that God has given us, be it in a holy or in a mundane setting. I think Penner is here confusing faith and reason, which are indeed two different things. But we have only one kind of reason bestowed upon us by our Creator. Douglas Grootuis makes this point when he comments on 1 John 3:11-24. Here, John insists that a sure sign that someone is truly Christian is that he or she loves other Christians. But, if a supposed Christian shows no love for other Christians, then when “you observe someone who, while claiming to be Christian, does not love Christians, you may infer that this person is not born again.” He makes his point clear when he writes that John is using simple logic here, and that there “is nothing contextual or relative about it. The apostle does not use some special ‘religious logic.’”¹⁸ Now, some might say that a different religious reasoning is required to understand the things of God. And there are passages of scripture that do teach precisely that (e.g., 1 Corinthians 2:14 speaks of how the things of God are only understood by those who can discern them through the Spirit). But, that God makes appeals to our reason in scripture is quite clear from the biblical record. “Biblically, the existence of an efficacious human reason is assumed. For example, in Isaiah 1:18 God appeals directly to

¹⁷ John G. Stackhouse, Jr., “From Architecture to Argument: Historical Resources for Christian Apologetics,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 50-51.

¹⁸ Douglas Grootuis, *Truth Decay* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 177.

human reason, and this represents a pattern throughout scripture. The nature of reason, however, is not explicitly described.”¹⁹

When we look at the New Testament (NT) witness to Christ and his resurrection, the lack of bifurcation between any alleged secular and religious reason becomes even more pronounced. The resurrection is the foundation of the early church’s kerygma, and the apostles believed that it was an event open to rational inspection; no special grace from God was required to understand it. In his classic work on historical apologetics, Avery Dulles admits that while the apologetic of the first-century church was different from the more elaborate apologetic of the Church Fathers, the first-century church was still an apologetic church. The gospel the church was preaching ran into opposition, and to answer “such objections, and possibly also in anticipation of foreseen objections, the Christians spoke about the signs and evidences they had found *convincing*” [italics mine].²⁰ When teaching about the resurrection, the writers of Acts and the Pauline literature knew that such “claims were of course contestable and had to be backed up by some kind of *reasoned* [italics mine] defense.”²¹

Or, take Paul’s speech to the Athenians in Acts 17, his Mars Hill sermon. Here, he appeals to the reasonableness of the Athenians. He does not assume that he possesses a “Christian” reasoning process, and they a “pagan” one. Quite the opposite. They have used their reason to arrive at a belief in the “unknown god” (v. 23). Paul never says that their reasoning process is flawed. In fact, Paul seems to think that they will be able to comprehend that this unknown god is really the true God of the Jews. Paul may have had the “mind of Christ” in him,

¹⁹ W. Cordan, “Reason,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 915.

²⁰ Avery Dulles, *A History of Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

but he seems to assume that his reasoning process works about the same as that of the pagan Greeks he addresses. Paul assumes that “Christian truth is public truth—truth for the marketplace that can be assessed according to universal criteria by which a thinking person . . . is willing to consider it openly, seriously, and humbly.”²² Here on Mars Hill, Paul actually makes *eight* assumptions about his Greek audience, ranging from their innate understanding that there is some sort of divinity in the universe (the “unknown god” of verse 23) to the fact that God overlooked humanity’s time of pagan innocence, but now expects repentance based on the facts revealed in Christ.²³

But is not humanity fallen, are there not passages in the Bible, especially in the NT, that teach that our reasoning process has been marred by sin? Yes, indeed, one such passage being in Romans 1, where the apostle talks of God abandoning those who sin to even greater sin because their minds are already clouded with it. And yes, that bondage *can* damage the reasoning process if left unchecked. This is what leads to the sexual immortality and idolatry that Paul talks about here. But at just what point in a person’s spiritual degeneration this abandonment by God occurs is hard to say. Paul obviously did not think that the people he preached to, be they Jew or Greek, had reached this theological point of no return. This brings to mind the traditional split between Calvinists, who insist that the fall has led us into a state of total depravity (meaning not that every act we do is depraved, but that the fall has infected every aspect of our being) and those who, like Roman Catholics, see the fall as damaging to our rationality, but not fatally so. But, even among Calvinists, evidentialist apologetics have never been totally rejected, even though

²² Groothuis, *Truth Decay*, 178.

²³ *Ibid.*, 178.

some Christians maintain that caricature. Even those with a “Reformed” bent (Augustine,²⁴ for example, and of course Calvin himself²⁵), do not reject the evidential approach out of hand; they only insist that reasoned arguments alone are not enough to bring one to saving faith. Or consider a committed Calvinist like Jonathan Edwards. Writings of Edwards attempt to balance God’s appeal to both our hearts and our minds. Norman Geisler says, “All truth is given by revelation, either general or special, and it must be received by reason. Reason is the God-given means for discovering the truth that God discloses, whether in his world or his Word. While God wants to reach the heart with truth, he does not bypass the mind along the way.”²⁶ The Holy Spirit is required for conversion. Still, “the work of the Spirit presupposes the Bible and the historical Jesus Christ. If faith is largely a creation of the Holy Spirit, it still remains true that you could not have the faith apart from the facts. In sum, the Holy Spirit is the *sufficient* cause of belief while the facts are a *necessary* cause of belief.”²⁷

Even William Lane Craig admits as much, so it is a bit odd that Penner takes him to task for his evidentialist approach. In his book, Penner points out that Craig is a Christian because he believes the Holy Spirit has opened his eyes to the truth of Christianity. But, because he knows implicitly that Christianity is true, he feels confident making rationalistic claims for the faith.²⁸ Penner is fair to Craig, I think. He knows that Craig does not insist that the Holy Spirit “needs” evidentialist apologetics to bring about personal conviction. But, Penner seems bothered by the

²⁴ Augustine of course spends several hundred pages of his *City of God* engaging in offensive apologetics to show the utter absurdity and wickedness of Roman paganism.

²⁵ Despite what many today think, Calvin did at times appeal to evidentialist arguments, though of course one’s calling to a Christian life was primarily the work of God. See Steven J. Wykstra, “Not Done in A Corner: How to be a Sensible Evidentialist about Jesus,” *Philosophical Books* 43 (2002), 99.

²⁶ Norman Geisler, “Rationalism,” in his *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Baker Academic, 1998), 634.

²⁷ A.J. Hoover, “Apologetics,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 70.

²⁸ For Penner’s analysis of Craig’s position that faith can come through the Spirit or through apologetic method, see *The End of Apologetics*, 22-36.

fact that Craig does state that sometimes the Holy Spirit uses rational apologetic arguments as part of His process of conversion.²⁹ But, as we saw above, in NT times, Paul was quite comfortable using rational arguments on Mars Hill. He certainly believed that the Holy Spirit worked to convict a person of Christian truth, so cannot the Spirit use our arguments in His work? Why limit how the Spirit works? If He indeed blows where he will, as Jesus taught, then to insist that the Holy Spirit works in one way and no other is to place Him in a box unbecoming the Third Person of the Trinity. I would argue (and I will return to this point at the end of this paper), that Craig is actually an ally of Penner's—both men know that arguments alone are not the only way that a non-Christian becomes a believer. The difference between Craig and Penner is one of degree, not kind.

In one of his earlier works on the evidence for the resurrection, Craig clearly states that “[s]hould the evidence [of Christ’s resurrection] be refuted somehow, the Christian faith would not be refuted. It would only mean that one could not prove historically that the Christian faith is true.... Thus, there are really two avenues to knowledge of the fact of the resurrection: the avenue of the Spirit and the avenue of historical inquiry.”³⁰ Craig here seems quite open to Penner’s position that Christian faith should be communal, based on the Spirit-influenced proclamation of Christianity’s divinely inspired apostles. The later Craig, of the 1990s and 2000s, is perhaps more confident in asserting the value of evidence-based Christianity, but again, he is not claiming that he can prove Christianity to be true, only that there is strong evidence that Christ rose from the dead, and that it is the best explanation for the start of the Christian faith. This is far different than asserting that he can prove, in scientific terms, that Christianity is

²⁹ Ibid., 25-26, n 11.

³⁰ William Lane Craig, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1981), 8.

empirically true. In his various public debates with atheists, he stresses that when he argues for the historicity of the resurrection, he does so based on the bare minimum of facts that even theologically moderate NT scholars accept (things like the fact of the empty tomb, or the early resurrection tradition that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 which, though written in the AD 50's, probably goes back almost to the events themselves).³¹

Are We Pre-moderns, Moderns, or Postmoderns? And Does It Matter?

For Penner, no modern, only a postmodern, would take the position he describes as follows. “To say it briefly, this condition of secularity is what makes it possible for us—unlike our pre-modern predecessors—to imagine the world (and ourselves) in such a way that the existence of God, and a transcendent, or ‘higher’ realm that makes sense of our world, is optional.”³² Penner, I think, intends this to be a critique of Craig and the modernist view he is trapped in, but the simple reality is that we in the West *are* still in the modernist mindset, and we *do* require evidence before we are willing to accept a proposition as true. The Enlightenment, and the modern worldview to which it gave rise, was not just one way of viewing reality, as postmoderns often claim. It is the most effective way that humanity has yet discovered for interpreting our lives and our world. The Enlightenment worldview saw the rise of modern science, the beginnings of human rights ethics, democratic forms of government, and so many other things that improved our world more than any other roughly 200-year period in history ever has. In short, the Enlightenment produces results. Of course the modern view has its limits, especially when it comes to insisting that non-Western, non-white worldviews are worthless, or

³¹ For a good summary of some of the major arguments that Craig usually employs in his public debates (debates which most observers concede that he wins, by the way, not only because he is flawlessly prepared, but because his opponents are often unprepared for the level of intellectual rigor that he arrays against them), see his “The Empty tomb of Jesus,” in *In Defense of Miracles*, ed. R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1997), 47-261.

³² Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 26.

that empiricism is the only possible way to knowledge, but the fact remains that the modern worldview is the one that still dominates life in the West (academia excluded!). It is for this reason that apologetics today is practiced not just by certain “unsophisticated” evangelicals (Penner never uses this kind of language, and even calls Craig a “first-rate analytic philosopher”³³), but this is the attitude toward apologetics often espoused by certain Christians who oppose its practice. Sophisticated brands of apologetics have been practiced for years now by some of the best Christian minds, like Craig, but also by Alvin Plantinga³⁴ and Richard Swinburne,³⁵ two of the finest philosophers within or without the Christian community. If the modern worldview is as outdated as Penner seems to think, it is hard to fathom why some of the finest intellects in Christian philosophy still operate under its presuppositions, namely, that there are evidences (not absolute proofs) for faith.

Was the Biblical Audience Pre-modern or Modern?

Penner, when advocating for his prophet-as-superior-to-genius position, often stresses the fact that the prophet speaks to an audience that understood the prophet’s mindset. In other words, the prophet, in effect, is preaching to the choir. This is true to an extent. The Old Testament (OT) prophets were speaking to a Jewish people who already knew the one true God. But even within the OT, we cannot assume that everyone was on the same theological page. If they were, the Psalmist’s critique that “the fool has said in his heart there is no God” (Psalm

³³ Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 21. Craig is not only one of the leading experts on resurrection apologetics, he is also recognized as one of the world’s leading experts on the cosmological argument, specifically the version developed by Muslim theologians called the *kalaam* (“eternity”) argument. See his *The Kalaam Cosmological Argument* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000).

³⁴ Plantinga is classified as a Reformed Epistemologist, and is not an evidentialist, yet he still goes to great lengths to assert the place of rationality in the Christian faith. See his *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

³⁵ Swinburne engages in philosophical apologetics in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford University Press, 1993), and strikes a balance between philosophical apologetics and evidentialist apologetics in *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

14:1) would make little sense. Obviously there was atheism in the OT world, though probably not so much as there is today. Job's wife, for example, sounds curiously postmodern when she tells her beleaguered husband to "curse God and die," almost as if the question of God's existence does not matter, or is foolish to even consider, in the face of his great sufferings.

And this is not only an OT problem. There are two areas in the NT that detract from Penner's insistence that ancient people automatically accepted a pre-modern worldview, and therefore apologetics were not necessary. First, we know from the gospels that there was great skepticism regarding Christ and His message. Even many who witnessed His miracles were not convinced. This may have been because the pre-modern mindset was not as gullible as Penner supposes or, more likely, it was because Jesus and his apostles were preaching a *new* version of Judaism. But how to preach to the choir before the choir has been formed? Here is an essential weakness in Penner's position—Christianity had to create itself first, before anyone could assume prophetic status within the new Christian community. Stephen was martyred in the Book of Acts, Paul was hounded out of synagogues, beaten, and generally abused, all because the message they preached seemed strange. And indeed it was a stumbling block to the Jews, and foolishness to the Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23).

So, what does Paul, the greatest of evangelists, do? As he himself says, he preaches Christ crucified...and *resurrected*. In 1 Corinthians 15:6, Paul refers to the 500 persons to whom the resurrected Christ appeared, many of whom were still alive, thus implying that the resurrection story was easy enough to vindicate. It is the empty tomb, and the encounter with the resurrected Christ, that makes true believers out of the apostles. They did not accept the story told to them by the women who visited Christ's empty tomb that he was no longer there (the testimony of women in NT times being of little value). They knew well that dead men stay dead.

They were far more familiar with death than we in our age of hospitals and nursing homes, and they harbored no fantasies about dead people coming back to life. Scottish skeptic David Hume was not the first one to propose that dead men generally stay dead!³⁶

And it is not just in early Christianity that such skepticism needed to be answered with rationalistic proof. When one looks at the beginnings of Muhammad's career, he was rejected by virtually everyone in Mecca, and one of the complaints against him was that he had no miracles to his credit. When did this change? When did he begin to assume the "apostle" status that Penner believes marks one as spiritually superior to the genius? Only after he begins to win battles with his small army of believers, often against much larger pagan forces. This, for the warrior culture of early 7th-century Arabia, was the evidence they needed that Muhammad's new message of monotheism was true, and that this new God was on his side in battle.³⁷

Finally, when Penner quotes Merold Westphal that "it never occurs to prophets to present their message in the mode of universally valid truths and imperatives,"³⁸ I cannot agree, and for two reasons. One, the prophets of the Bible, and Jesus himself, often *do* present their teachings as universally valid (for example, Christ's eschatological predictions seem to be intended for humanity as a whole, not just the Jewish nation). And two, even if Jesus did not present his message as valid for all people at all times, his greatest apostle, St. Paul, surely does portray Christ as savior for all, Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian. A prophet may not always have

³⁶ I am indebted to N.T. Wright for this argument. See "The Self-Revelation of God in Human History: A Dialogue on Jesus with N.T. Wright," in Antony Flew's *There is A God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 197-98.

³⁷ For a succinct, informative of Muhammad's early career as a warrior-general, see Thomas W. Lippman, *Understanding Islam* (New York: Meridian, 1995), 44-53. Eventually in Islam, Muslims began to cite the literary beauty of the Koran, and Muhammad's alleged illiteracy, as proof of its divine origins. But this argument began to be used after the early Muslim community had come into existence. It was not sufficient on its own to establish Muhammad's credentials. He won respect as a prophet through his military prowess.

³⁸ Merold Westphal, *Kierkegaard's Critique of Reason and Society* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991).

the universal applicability of his message in mind, but those who come after him and who are charged with establishing the new faith, certainly do. Otherwise, we would not today be able to talk of “world religions.”

Should the Gospel Be Used to “Tear Down”?

At the heart of Penner’s objection to evidentialist apologetics is that he does not like the concept of objective truth. And one reason he does not is that it leads to intellectual arrogance and pride (which can certainly be the case in certain situations). Consider what he says in the following passage, which I quote at length due to its importance in understanding his position:

Not lying far beneath the surface of my skeptical thesis about modern apologetics is an ethical critique of modern objectivism that goes along with the ethics of belief I mentioned earlier. By “objectivism,” here, I mean the epistemological thesis that the most important realities are captured in propositions as “objective truths.” A crucial plank in my description of truth is the conviction that, in the sense most important to the Christian gospel, truth can only *edify*—it *cannot* tear down. That is, if some piece of communication—whether an argument or a propositional assertion—is not *edifying* (italics mine), it is not the truth.³⁹

Penner follows up with an analogy based on C. S. Lewis’s *Chronicles of Narnia*. In *The Last Battle*, the Christ figure, the lion Aslan, explains that good deeds done in the name of Tash (the satanic monkey character) are still good deeds, while evil deeds done in Aslan’s name are really deeds belonging to the diabolical Tash. “The lesson in this for Christian witness is that I cannot use the objective truths of Christianity to tear down others and think that I am thereby communicating the truth of the gospel.”⁴⁰

If by the above Penner means that the gospel should not be used to degrade others who think differently, I fully agree. But, if he is here ruling out what is often called offensive (rather than defensive) apologetics, then this is quite problematic. For if we are to forgo any theological

³⁹ Penner, *End of Apologetics*, 139-140.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

attempts to “tear down” that which opposes Christian truth, much of Christian history will have to be re-written. For instance, as Gustaf Aulen has shown, the Church Fathers saw the work of Christ mainly as one of tearing down; Jesus came to destroy the works of sin, death, and the devil, which he terms the *Christus Victor* theory of the atonement.⁴¹ Not only that, but the early Fathers also waged fierce theological war with the various gnostic heresies of the second and third centuries. And they probably were not much concerned with edifying their opponents, but rather with tearing down the heretical threats which they rightly saw as false versions of Christianity.⁴² And what to do with Augustine’s *City of God*, a good portion of which is devoted to systematically refuting (and indeed, mocking!) the pagan worldview of ancient Rome? And was not Christianity a weapon in the hands of Martin Luther King, Jr., who wished to destroy (non-violently, of course) the evils of racism and segregation in America? Even someone as theologically liberal as Walter Wink sees Christianity as a means of destroying what he calls the “powers,” the demonic forces that keep much of humanity enthralled under what he terms the “domination system.”⁴³

Who Is the Apologist’s Audience?

Penner’s rejection of evidentialist apologetics is not based on a desire to be inclusive of other faiths, or to advocate for religious pluralism. In fact, the modern father of religious pluralism, John Hick,⁴⁴ does not fare well at Penner’s hands. After beginning his career as an

⁴¹ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

⁴² For a good introduction on how the early Church Fathers fought back against gnostic heretics, see Arlund J. Hultgren and Steven J. Haggmark (eds). *The Earliest Christian Heretics: Readings from Their Opponents* (Augsburg Books, 2008).

⁴³ His trilogy on the powers and the domination system they create was critically acclaimed as well as commercially successful, and has been condensed by Wink into the easily readable *The Powers That Be* (Harmony, 1999).

⁴⁴ See Hick’s *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982) for Hick’s early treatment of religious pluralism. See also his later work that specifically rejects Christian uniqueness in the realm of world

evangelical, Hick became one of the leading voices for the idea that all the major world religions are equally salvific. Penner rejects the view that Hick's theology inevitably produces, namely, the idea that truth is subjective, and one religion is as true as another. Penner writes that although this free-for-all view of truth "is a caricature of someone as philosophically sophisticated as Hick, I often encounter this exact caricature in those who adopt his general position but are less nuanced than he is."⁴⁵

Penner is certainly right to reject this position. Not only does it violate the law of non-contradiction, it is insulting to all deeply religious people, who believe that their particular religious beliefs are indeed different than those held by other religious persons. No non-Christian wants to be told that she worships Christ unknowingly. This, of course, is the basic idea behind Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christianity," that is, that Christ's grace flows through all the world's major religions, even if their adherents do not know it.

But here a question arises. For whom do apologists like Craig and other evidentialists write? Much of the work is indeed scholarly, aimed at an academic audience, but much of it is also written on a less academically rigorous plane, obviously because most of those who read apologetics do not have the benefit of holding advanced degrees in theology and philosophy, thus the great success of popular apologist Josh McDowell's books.⁴⁶ And, if the average consumer of Christian apologetics is not a seminary professor, but perhaps a reasonably well

religions, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age* (Presbyterian Publishing Corp., 2006). For a critique of John Hick, see my "Is John Hick's Concept of 'The Real' an Adequate Criterion for Evaluating Religious Truth-Claims?" In *Currents in Twenty-First Century Christian Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008), 34-49.

⁴⁵ Penner, *The End of Apologetics*, 125, n 37.

⁴⁶ His most famous popular, though still learned, works are his *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, vol. 1 (Thomas Nelson, 1992), and vol. 2 (Thomas Nelson 1999).

educated layperson, then the distinction that Penner makes between Craig's mistaken modern view and the more accurate postmodern view really does not matter, for the average man or woman in the street still thinks in terms of the modernist position. In fact, once one ventures outside the halls of academe, it is not likely that very many people will be able to tell you what a postmodern worldview is, much less will they base their lives around it. Simply put, the man on the street wants evidence if he is going to embrace a controversial idea, ideology, or religion. Consider that most trenchant of religious critiques, the problem of evil. Long before anyone had heard of terms like pre-modern, modern, or postmodern, skeptics pointed to the existence of evil and suffering as proof that the biblical God of love was a fable. The Book of Job, one of the oldest in the OT, wrestles with this very issue, so it is obviously a question that vexed the ancient, pre-modern Hebrew mind.

In fact, the type of reasoning that Penner condemns as modern and therefore outdated is used by theological liberals as well as conservatives. For example, Christians used to believe, based on Genesis, that the world was only a few thousand years old, and that Adam and Eve were literal people, the two progenitors of the human race. But beyond the realm of Christian fundamentalism, how many Christians believe those propositions today? They reject them because of objective evidence to the contrary. We have overwhelming evidence from all branches of science that the world is much older than the chronology worked out in the 1600's by Irish churchman Bishop Ussher, who added up the lifespans of the Genesis patriarchs and determined the world was about 6,000 years old, a number that is still maintained by certain Christian fundamentalists. The science of evolution makes it problematic to say the least to insist that Adam and Eve were literally the first two human beings on the planet. Why is objective, "modern" evidence allowed to count against the traditional "conservative" undergirding of the

Bible's teaching on human origins, but not allowed to support "conservative" biblical truth, as in the view of someone like Craig? I do not presume to know Penner's view on Adam and Eve, but my guess would be that he does not insist that Christians need to take them as the literal beginning of humanity. In other words, why are "liberal" theories about the Bible, such as the one that rejects Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, a view which arose in the "modern" 1800's, still accepted by so many mainstream scholars? Or, why is Pauline authorship of certain epistles traditionally attributed to him denied by so many NT scholars? They do so because they believe there is *evidence* that the text of the Pentateuch shows signs of editing at the hands of several different persons (I personally believe that Moses could easily have written portions of the Pentateuch, but that does not rule out redaction at the hands of later compilers). And many scholars, upon analyzing the Greek writing style of the Pauline corpus, find differences in style they think provide sufficient *evidence* to cast into doubt Paul's authorship of Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, and Titus. These liberal (or moderate?) scholars are doing the same thing Craig does with his cumulative case evidentialist argument for the resurrection, examining the evidence and following that evidence to the best explanation.

How to Adjudicate Religious Truth-Claims?

As stated above, Penner is rightly critical of John Hick, who accepts the validity of all the world's major religious traditions, even when they clearly contradict one another on major points like the means of salvation, the doctrine of God, the nature of humanity, etc. Penner says that he is not advocating a completely "argument free" Christianity. But though he several times makes the claim that he is not opposed to all evidential arguments in favor of Christianity, he never tells us *which* arguments in his estimation are worth pursuing. So, it seems to me that Penner has no way to distinguish one religious "apostle" from another. In fact, he states that "[w]e can never

show the light of Christ and the truths that edify us *except* through our words and actions.”⁴⁷ He cites Martin Luther’s “here I stand; I can do no other” declaration at the Diet of Worms as an example of a Christian who “desires for everyone to be edified by the truth that is true for him.”⁴⁸ But Luther is not basing his stance only on his own experience—he is also basing it on what he considered to be the infallible, objective truth of scripture. It is the Roman Catholic Church and its (in Luther’s opinion) non-objective, non-scriptural beliefs to which he is objecting! He does not espouse a truth that is true for him, but one that, he thought, was evident for all to see in the pages of the Bible.

Penner is fond of appealing to Christian tradition to undergird the faith, and there is much to be said for this approach. Consider Luther and Calvin’s reverence for early Fathers like Augustine. But ultimately, the appeal to tradition will not work, for each religion has its own prophets, its own scriptures, etc. Muslims claim Muhammad is an apostle and not a genius, Christians make the same claim for Jesus, and Buddhists do the same for their faith’s founder. So, Penner must adopt one of two positions. One, naïve Hickian pluralism, which he rightly rejects. Two, a fideistic version of Christianity in the tradition of apologetic presuppositionalists like Cornelius Van Til, whom he does not target in his book. Ironically, there does seem to be some common ground between them, as Van Til also ardently rejects the modern idea that we can treat Christianity like any other proposition. He rejects the belief that our reason can stand above the truth of the gospel:

The traditional method [the modern, evidentialist method] had explicitly built into it the right and ability of the natural man, apart from the work of the Spirit of God, to be the judge of the claim of the authoritative Word of God. It is the man who, by means of self-established intellectual tools, puts his stamp of approval on the Word of God and then, only after that grand act, does he listen to it. God’s word must first pass man’s test of

⁴⁷ Penner, *End of Apologetics*, 130.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

good and evil, truth and falsity. But once you tell a non-Christian this, why should he be worried by anything else that you say? You have already told him he is quite all right just the way he is!⁴⁹

Note that Van Til is trying to avoid the same thing that Penner is, namely, using the tools of modernity and secularism to judge the Word of God. And what is Van Til's answer to arrogant modernist evidentialist apologetics? It is summed up well by Reformed scholar and Van Til authority John Frame: "Human beings are obliged to presuppose [the biblical] God in all of their thinking, and two, that unbelievers resist this obligation in every aspect of thought and life."⁵⁰ The problem for me, and I am sure for Penner too given his distaste for theological certainty, is why should one presuppose the truth of the God of the Bible? Why not presuppose the truth of Islam? I have pointed out elsewhere, Van Til's system could work equally well for any theist, especially a Muslim one.⁵¹ Simply put, Van Til runs into the same problem that Hick and, ultimately, Penner do; they have no way to adjudicate between rival religious claims because they, unlike the apostles, are unwilling to allow Christian evidences to speak for themselves. My guess is Penner would be no more comfortable with Van Til than he would be with Hick.

A Way Forward

Penner must allow for the type of argumentation that a William Lane Craig uses, or be forever lost between the poles of Hick's pluralism and Van Til's fideism. But this does not mean that Penner must give up reliance upon church tradition, or upon the example of Christian lives well lived as a tool of evangelization. Nor does it mean he has to jettison those inspired men of the Bible whom Christians rightly regard as apostles (not geniuses). And so I partially agree with

⁴⁹ Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo," in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E.R. Geehan (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 11.

⁵⁰ John Frame, "Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 282.

⁵¹ John J. Johnson, "How a Muslim Could Employ Van Til's Apologetic System," in *Currents in Twenty-First Century Christian Apologetics*, 18-33.

Penner when he explains that the best way to show that one's religious truth is specifically Christian is by appeal "to something like the Christian tradition—or, better, the church."⁵² And I know of no academically trained Christian apologist writing today who would disagree that the Christian tradition handed down to us by the church is vitally important. I also think Penner is correct that apologetics is practiced wrongly, even sinfully, when it devolves into a shouting match, and the point is to "coerce or force unbelievers" into accepting Christianity "through cleverly designed apologetic arguments and brilliantly devised pieces of rhetoric," forcing them to believe "*despite* themselves."⁵³ Apologetics should always be done within the bounds of Christian love and humility.⁵⁴

So why not keep all that Penner advocates, but allow for rationalistic arguments as well? His claim that evidentialist arguments harm Christianity is nowhere documented in his book (aside from a personal anecdote or two about people Penner knows personally who were alienated by overly aggressive evidentialists). There simply is no evidence that I know of that evidentialism is "hurting" Christianity, at least not outside of academic circles where postmodernism has no real influence. And by the time most men and women reach academia as professors and their minds are intellectually "complete," it is doubtful that many converts will be made among them anyway, whether with Penner's Kierkegaardian model or with Craig's evidentialist model. But, for those academics who are willing to keep an open mind (and we must remember that C. S. Lewis and John Warwick Montgomery both came to faith based on their examination of the evidence for Christ's resurrection, although it must be conceded that Montgomery was an undergraduate when he experienced conversion), and for the much larger

⁵² Penner, *End of Apologetics*, 122

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁵⁴ For a good treatment of this issue, see John Stackhouse, *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

group of non-believers outside of academe, I submit that a twofold method, based on Penner's position and on Craig's position, is a wise approach.

When William Lane Craig wrote the following lines in an essay concerning Christian truth claims in a world of religious pluralism, they strike me as something that Penner could wholeheartedly endorse. "The proper response of the Christian to [non-Christians] is not merely to garner the elements of truth from the world's religions but, far more important, share with their adherents, in a spirit of love, the Way, the Truth and the Life."⁵⁵ Penner at one point even agrees with Craig, at least until Craig begins to put too much emphasis on the idea that Christians and non-Christians can agree on what is "rationally" true: "I come closest to agreeing with William Lane Craig on apologetics, when he warns against skipping past the straightforward declaration of what one believes and moving straight to the apologetic task of philosophical argumentation."⁵⁶ How might a rapprochement work in real life? Consider the case of the late Antony Flew. Flew spent most of his life as one of academia's premier atheists, but changed his mind and admitted in a book published in 2007 that he was open to the idea of God: "My discovery of the Divine... has been an exercise in what is traditionally called natural theology. It has had no connection with any of the revealed religions."⁵⁷ Perhaps this could be called his reaction to Craigian rationalism. In order for him to come to faith in the *Christian* God, perhaps Penner's approach would have worked (assuming Flew did not pass away just a few years after his semi-conversion).

⁵⁵ William Lane Craig, "Politically Incorrect Salvation," in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, 97.

⁵⁶ Penner, *End of Apologetics*, 84.

⁵⁷ Antony Flew, *There is a God*, 93. I recall that when this book came out, many atheists thought that Flew's change of heart regarding God had been exaggerated, or that he was perhaps no longer intellectually in full control of what he was writing. However, in a press release, he reaffirmed what he said in the book. See http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/17/arts/17flew.html?_r=0

Paul said he became all things to all men that he might save some of them. Why limit ourselves when the gospel we present is a matter of ultimate concern for men and women, both in this life and in the life to come? What separates Penner and Craig seems to me to be a ditch, but not a canyon. Both have much to offer a world that is in dire need of the gospel message. Perhaps a fitting conclusion is provided by Wolfhart Pannenberg. Although hardly a Craigian apologist, he believed the resurrection of Christ was, in Craig-like fashion, good evidence for the truth of Christianity.⁵⁸ John W. Cooper sums up Pannenberg's position, a position that might just be acceptable to both Penner and Craig, when Cooper explains: "Pannenberg claims that the witness of Scripture, the church's proclamation and worship, and theology's explanation of God's activity in history [i.e., including the convincing evidentialist arguments for Christ's resurrection] are sufficient evidence for humans to recognize that the truth of Christianity is the answer to their ultimate questions."⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis Wilkins and Duane Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster), 968, chap. 3. Pannenberg, like Craig, knows the resurrection is not proof beyond a doubt that Christianity is true; final verification will only be possible in the eschaton.

⁵⁹ John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 264-65.