

Apologetical Implications of Proverbs

Introduction

Contrary to the opinion of some, apologetics is not a discipline that doctrine-obsessed Christians concocted to satisfy their need to argue with dissenters. Rather, apologetics is mandated by scripture so that believers may worship God with their minds, protect the church, and evangelize the lost. Specifically, apologetics may be defined as the intellectual contention for the veracity of the Christian worldview (1 Pet. 3:15, Jude 3, 2 Cor. 10:4-5). A proper understanding of this important discipline requires a study of epistemology, methodology, argumentation, attitude, and behavior. By studying Proverbs we will find that God has given us a book that almost single-handedly may be used to furnish the Christian apologist with an understanding of each of these topics.

Before we study the apologetical implications of Proverbs, a basic overview of the book is in order. Written by King Solomon, Proverbs contains practical instructions in wisdom—living as Yahweh intends.¹ To accomplish this, Proverbs presents the way of the wise and the fool.² The observations made concerning these two types of people over a wide variety of situations have been distilled into timeless maxims that anyone seeking wisdom should adopt.³ These maxims, or proverbs, are brief, particular expressions of truth that reflect an inductive look at the world.⁴ Therefore, most proverbs were not intended to describe every situation that one will encounter.

Epistemology

At the heart of apologetics is an epistemological question: is Christianity true and how do we know? Although the topic of apologetics receives considerable attention, epistemology has been relegated to the realm of obscurity by most Christian teachers—a realm of thinking best left up to ivory tower philosophers. Such a low view of epistemology is very foolish, however, since a worldview will live or die on epistemological grounds. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Proverbs—a book that focuses so heavily on foolishness and wisdom—should contain such rich epistemological insight. Unfortunately, most Christians enter the book of Proverbs oblivious to such insights. Greg Bahnsen, the well-known student of Cornelius Van Til, rightly comments on this problem:

It is a shame that Christian scholars, apologists, and philosophers have so often neglected a detailed study of the book of Proverbs in their attempts to exposit and work from a biblical epistemology (theory of knowledge). ... Proverbs can certainly aid us in the development and elaboration of the presuppositional approach to knowledge ...⁵

For both scholars and laymen, a neglect of epistemology is most likely rooted in improper responses to modernism that developed over a hundred years ago. Unsure about how

¹ Daniel Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 221.

² *Ibid.*, 222.

³ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵ Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2004), 33.

to respond to the great onslaught by modernism that begin in the Enlightenment period, many Christians either assimilated to modernist influence or raised the white flag with regards to philosophy in general.⁶ In both cases, epistemology became another realm owned by the world and therefore uninfluenced by the Bible. Likewise, Christians began to accept the dichotomy of faith and knowledge, seeing faith as something sacred and knowledge as something secular.

Such a dichotomy, or fact-value distinction, is foreign to scripture. Rather than separating faith and knowledge, Solomon presents God has having a monopoly on knowledge: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7) and “From His mouth come knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:6).^{7,8} This parallels Colossians 2:3, in which Paul says that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Of course, the thought that God is sovereign even over knowledge is greatly offensive to carnal man, which is why “fools hate knowledge” (Prov. 1:22). The fool refuses to acknowledge his epistemological subservience to God and consequently is without understanding, discernment, instruction, wisdom, and knowledge (Prov. 2:2-11).

Paul speaks at length on how man’s foolishness, which begins with a desire for autonomy, affects his mind.⁹ In Romans 1:21 we read that “although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” The consequence, Paul writes, is that they refused to acknowledge the Creator-creature distinction by “exchanging the truth of God for a lie” (Rom. 1:25). And in Ephesians we read that those renewed in Christ “should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them” (Eph. 4:17-18). We see, then, that foolishness does not merely affect one’s epistemology, it is an epistemology.

Having rejected the beginning of knowledge, the fool now interprets empirical data, experience, and revelation through a paradigm that will always exalt his autonomy. The consequence, according to Paul, is often “knowledge falsely so-called” (1 Tim. 6:20).¹⁰ And just as the fool’s thinking is futile, so is any attempt to correct his foolishness (Prov. 12:1, 26:11-12).¹¹ The fool will not abandon his false epistemology because to do so would require him to repent and admit his rightful place before the Creator. Furthermore, in Romans 1:26-32 and Ephesians 4:19, Paul explains how the fool’s futile thinking leads to immoral behavior. In other words, the unbeliever suppresses his knowledge of God in hopes of trying to excuse his desire for wickedness.¹²

⁶ Many clergy bent under the pressure of uniformitarianism and accepted theistic evolution. Science, therefore, was given authority to interpret scripture, rather than vice versa. Others, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, sought to protect Christianity by making it purely a system of ethics, unaffected by objective truth.

⁷ See Appendix for a defense of this interpretation of Proverbs 1:7.

⁸ All scripture in this essay is taken from the New King James Version.

⁹ In the vein of Schleiermacher, many Christians deny the noetic effects of sin. This is most apparent in statements like “there’s a God-shaped hole in our heart,” “he had all of the head knowledge but he missed Heaven by twelve inches,” and “accept Christ into your heart.” The assumption is that man foremostly has a heart problem, because sin, allegedly, is only a matter of the heart. This contradicts 1 Tim. 2:4, which teaches that faith is knowledge.

¹⁰ The conclusions of the unbeliever’s reasoning will often contradict scripture because he has reached that conclusion on the false premise that he is the authority. Some critics of Cornelius Van Til, however, have misconstrued this and asserted that unbelievers cannot have any knowledge.

¹¹ This is not to say that the fool is “unsavable.” Rather, the Holy Spirit must first mercifully regenerate the fool’s mind before our arguments will persuade him.

¹² The wicked behavior of the fool is chronicled throughout Proverbs (Prov. 6:12-15, 7:22, 10:23, 14:2).

Unfortunately, many Christian apologists adopt the foolishness of the unbeliever by catering to the unbeliever's epistemology. Rather than obeying Peter's admonition to "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts" (1 Pet. 3:15) at the beginning of the apologetic task, these apologists argue *towards* God's authority rather than from it. The concluding argument is rather odd: the apologist assumes that man is the ultimate authority in order to prove that God is the ultimate authority. Bahnsen comments on this in *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*:

The Christian's final standard, the inspired word of God, teaches us that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7). If the apologist treats the starting point of knowledge as something other than reverence for God, then unconditional submission to the unsurpassed greatness of God's wisdom at the end of his argumentation does not really make sense. There would always be something greater than God's wisdom—namely, the supposed wisdom of one's intellectual starting point. The word of God would necessarily (logically, if not personally) remain subordinate to that autonomous, final standard.¹³

Such double-mindedness, of course, is sinful because the apologist has abandoned his presuppositional commitment to God's word. Rather than fully trusting Yahweh, the apologist has leaned on his own understanding (Prov. 3:5). Furthermore, the apologetic itself will utilize inferior arguments that are grounded in sinking sand, according to the vain traditions of men, and not according to Christ (Matt. 7:24-27, Col. 2:8).

Another proverb of great epistemological significance is found in Proverbs 22:20-21, which says, "Have I not written to you excellent things of counsel and knowledge, that I may make you know the certainty of the words of truth." Throughout the history of philosophy we see philosophers failing in their attempts to achieve certainty (the absence of doubt) and then claiming that certainty is unattainable. Such is the case when man seeks knowledge through his own intellectual self-sufficiency. With the exception of true biblical epistemology, all epistemologies reduce to subjectivism and therefore skepticism or agnosticism. In Christ, however, we find an infallible justification for knowledge and therefore have no reason to doubt that which God has revealed.¹⁴

In summarizing Christian epistemology we would do well to use the words of Johannes Kepler: "O God, I thank Thee that Thou hast permitted me to think Thy thoughts after Thee."¹⁵ All knowledge is given by God (Ps. 94:10, 1 Cor. 4:7), and apart from Him is no understanding (Prov. 2:6, 9:10). The wise will accept this and remain humble before the Lord of knowledge (1 Sam. 2:3). "My son, pay attention to my wisdom; lend your ear to my understanding, that you may preserve discretion, and your lips may keep knowledge" (Prov. 5:1-2).

Methodology

Biblical epistemology deeply affects methodology. To err on the former is to err on the latter. As we have seen, the unbeliever holds to an entirely different means of knowing than the believer. This difference is not rooted in some intellectual misstep that can be corrected with more knowledge. Rather, the unbeliever already has the very knowledge that he attempts to

¹³ Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1998), 3.

¹⁴ Christians may doubt God's word, but to do so is to act irrationally and sinfully. Sin is always irrational.

¹⁵ A.W. Tozer, "Man - The Dwelling Place of God - On the Origin and Nature of Things, A.W. Tozer," Christians Unite, <http://articles.christiansunite.com/article156.shtml> (accessed March 12, 2008).

refute (a knowledge of God's existence and authority). Just as foolish as unbelief, then, is the notion that apologists should cater to unbelief in their apologetic.

In remaining faithful to Christ, we must make Him the beginning as well as the end of our apologetic. Rational apologetics has long taught that reason precedes faith, as presented in adages like, "I have reasons to believe," or "Christianity is not intellectual suicide." Christian epistemology, however, teaches that which Augustine stated long ago: "I believe *in order to* understand." Psalm 36:9 says, "In your light we see light." And even though many evidentialist and rationalist apologists regard 1 Peter 3:15 as the charter verse of apologetics, they fail to consider its opening clause: "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts." Peter understood that Christ has pre-eminence in the apologetic task. As C.S. Lewis explained, it is man and not God who is "in the dock" during apologetics.¹⁶

Having recognized the unavoidable prejudice of every man, the apologist should readily avoid any appeals to "neutral ground" between himself and the unbeliever. Instead of pretending that the unbeliever's bias will not affect his verdict from the evidence, the apologist should attack the unbeliever at a presuppositional level by pointing out and refuting his anti-God bias. Furthermore, the apologist must recognize that attacking a non-Christian worldview using evidence interpreted within the Christian worldview is simply a begging of the question.¹⁷ How does one avoid unfaithfulness and circularity? Proverbs 26:4-5 presents a solution to both of these apologetic dilemmas: "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes."

The rich apologetic insight of this verse is often missed, unfortunately, in favor of vague commentary that does little more than restate the obvious: there is a time to answer the fool and a time to simply ignore him.¹⁸ In light of presuppositionalism, however, we see that verse four echoes the concern of adopting the unbeliever's foolishness in order to cater to him during argumentation. Verse five contains even more profound insight. In order to argue without begging the question the apologist must utilize a line of argument known as *reductio ad absurdum* ("reduction to absurdity"). Bahnsen elaborates on this in *Always Ready*:

In using this kind of argument your aim is to show that the opponent's premise entails a conclusion which is known to be false. Since it does so, the premise in question must itself also be false. (This is a rule in formal logic known as "*modus tollens*": from "If P, then Q" and the addition of "not-Q," the conclusion "not-P" necessarily follows.)¹⁹

By stepping inside the unbeliever's worldview and defeating it by its own standards the apologist has avoided circularity.²⁰ Christ uses this type of argument in Mark 3 after the scribes charge him with casting out demons by the ruler of demons: "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970), 244.

¹⁷ This does not mean evidence is useless during apologetics—contrary to the caricature many evidentialists paint of presuppositionalism. Rather, apologists must recognize the rightful place of evidences in persuasively demonstrating what is ultimately justified by God's word.

¹⁸ Bruce Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapters 15-31* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 349.

¹⁹ Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2004), 147.

²⁰ Destroying a non-Christian worldview, however, does not prove the Christian worldview. Although *reductio ad absurdum* is utilized by Van Til's "indirect proof" (the transcendental argument for God's existence), the premises of this proof must first be proven by "direct" proofs (proofs that utilize *modus ponens*) that do beg the question. Circularity is unavoidable. The closer one moves to one's ultimate presupposition the more obvious this becomes.

kingdom is divided, that house cannot stand” (Mark 3:23-24). Likewise, Solomon indicates the strength of *reductio ad absurdum*: “Therefore they shall eat of the fruit of their own way, and be filled to the full with their own fancies” (1:31). The idea presented is identical to the modern maxim “you are what you eat.”²¹ Applying this to apologetics, we could say that when the unbeliever begins his epistemology with a foolish presupposition (his own authority) then he will craft for himself a nonsensical worldview.

Proverbs 14:12 also carries strong apologetic overtones: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” The New International Commentary on the Old Testament summarizes this verse’s implications very nicely.

[The road to death] is deceptive because there is a conflict between the limited, opaque human perception of truth and the constitution of reality itself. The house of the wicked is annihilated because it is built on the flimsy foundation of human epistemology, the relative truth accessible to human sight. Only the omniscient, omnipotent God knows the true road that leads to life, reality as it actually is.²²

Solomon also hints at the strength of *reductio ad absurdum* in Proverbs 10:14, 10:27, 11:9, 11:14, 14:18, and 14:27. In each case, the fools “received in themselves the penalty of their error which was due” (Rom. 1:27). Pointing this out to the unbeliever can make for an enlightening, even soul-winning, conversation. In the case of the arrogant fool, however, the apologist can only hope to silence the fool. To continue along in “foolish disputes” (Titus 3:9) no doubt contradicts Solomon’s admonition in the fourth verse.

Arguments

Whereas many laymen think that apologetics amounts to little more than stacking up the best arguments against the unbeliever, we have seen that the biblically-minded apologist should understand epistemology and methodology before engagement.²³ Fortunately, Solomon has written many proverbs that may furnish the presuppositional apologist with solid *reductio ad absurdum* arguments. Such “internal critiques,” however, do prove Christianity in and of themselves.²⁴ Rather, internal critiques fit into a proof known as the “transcendental argument for the existence of God” (TAG).²⁵ Formally written out, TAG appears as follows:²⁶

Prove A: The Christian God exists.

Step 1 ~A: (Assume the opposite of A) The Christian God does not exist.

Step 2 (~A → B): If God does not exist then there is no intelligible experience because God is the precondition of intelligibility.

Step 3 (~B): There is intelligible experience. (Contradiction)

²¹ Bruce Waltke, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 211.

²² *Ibid.*, 591-592.

²³ This is not to say that every Christian must study presuppositionalism in-depth before having even the smallest conversation. Rather, many believers do understand presuppositionalism even if they cannot articulate it in the same fashion as Van Til and Bahnsen.

²⁴ A sound proof is an argument in which the premises are true and the form is valid. Contrary to common thought, persuasion is not a criterion for proof.

²⁵ Van Til borrowed from Immanuel Kant by calling a precondition for knowledge a “transcendental.”

²⁶ Thanks to Ronald DiGiacomo for writing out this proof.

Step 4 (~ ~A): It is not the case that God does not exist. (*Modus Tollens* on 2 and 3)

Step 5 (A): God does exist. (Law of negation)

Referred to as the “crown jewel” of the presuppositionalist’s arsenal against unbelief, TAG aims to undermine anti-Christian arguments by proving that one must actually presuppose the truth of Christianity in order to attempt to disprove Christianity. As Greg Bahnsen famously said, “The best proof for Christianity is that without Christianity you couldn’t prove anything.”²⁷ Van Til noted that TAG amounts to nothing less than a “call to conversion,” because the unbeliever is confronted with his need to fear the Lord on even the most fundamental level of reasoning.²⁸

The key premise is found in step two, which is essentially a deduction from Proverbs 1:7, Colossians 2:3, or 1 Sam. 2:3. Apart from this grounding in God’s word, TAG would have no more justification than any of the proofs presented by the unbeliever.²⁹ Of course, presenting TAG as written above lacks persuasiveness since the circularity is so obvious. Instead, the apologist must *demonstrate* step two through an internal critique. It is here, therefore, that several of Solomon’s proverbs become valuable apologetic tools.

One of the more common epistemologies held throughout the millennia is empiricism. Empiricism basically posits that all knowledge comes through sense experience. Consequently, empiricists must ultimately appeal to sense experience when justifying their beliefs. Such an epistemology presupposes, however, that the human senses are actually reliable. Have empiricists succeeded in proving the reliability of the senses through empiricism? Any attempt to do so will beg the question, in which case the empiricist must fall back on subjective dogmatism—which is no justification at all. In scripture, however, we have good reason to trust our senses: “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made them both” (Prov. 20:12). In other words, we have reason to trust our senses because a good God made them who intended us to learn through our senses.

Another acclaimed epistemology since the Enlightenment is positivism, which holds that the only authentic knowledge is scientific knowledge.³⁰ Thanks to positivism, many people regard science as a foe of Christianity. Ironically, the positivists have no justification for science—their cherished idol—for numerous reasons.³¹ Not only does scripture provide the justification, but Proverbs actually presents science as something glorious: “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter.” God is glorified by His omniscient, which makes Him superior to man. Man, nevertheless, is glorified in his own way when he “searches out” God’s creation, like a child exploring a seashore.³²

²⁷ Lecture by Greg Bahnsen: “The Certainty of Christianity.” Available from Covenant Media Foundation.

²⁸ Lecture by Greg Bahnsen: “Transcendental Arguments.” Available from Covenant Media Foundation.

²⁹ The premise in step 3 is also justified by scripture. Also, see footnote 20.

³⁰ “Positivism - Wikipedia,” Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Positivism> (accessed March 12, 2008).

³¹ Science presupposes the uniformity of nature. Christians can justify the uniformity of nature in Gen. 8:22 and Col. 1:17. The positivist, however, must make an inductive appeal based on his experience (since he is finite). The problems here are two-fold. First, induction assumes that nature is uniform, hence the positivist begs the question. Second, induction always asserts the consequent, which is tolerable in every-day matters but certainly not in matters of ultimate epistemological consideration.

³² Perhaps the great scientist Isaac Newton explained this best when he said, “I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.”

“Free will,” or indeterminism, is a popular concept among Christians as well as non-Christians.³³ Christian indeterminists argue that since God is fully sovereign and yet man is full responsible, compatibilism must be the case.³⁴ To maintain such a position, however, the indeterminist must hold to the philosophical surd of libertarian free will (LFW). LFW destroys both knowledge and moral responsibility by ultimately making choices uncaused, in which case choices are arbitrary and therefore irrational. Having reduced LFW to absurdity, the biblical apologist may point to Proverbs 16:33 as a clear indicator of incompatibilist determinism: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”³⁵ Here Solomon shows that even the quintessence of randomness—the casting of a lot—is fully under the Lord’s control.

The value of argumentation itself is up for question during apologetic discussion. Without realizing it, both parties assume that argumentation is a means of arriving at truth. Yet why use argumentation and not brute force, emotional appeals, or some other form of coercion to persuade one’s opponent? Or why argue towards the truth at all? Why not argue towards a lie, so long as it will help achieve one’s ends? Proverbs, however, urges those in disagreement to *argue* towards the *truth*: “The first one to plead his case seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him” (18:17). In both the Old and New Testament the Lord looks highly upon rational discourse (Is. 1:18, 2 Cor. 10:4-5, Acts 17:2-3). Furthermore, the legal system requires honest argumentation in order to operate justly (25:8-10).

As with epistemology, the unbeliever’s system of ethics is entirely subjective. Consequently, he has no basis on which to condemn the most horrendous atrocities. Legal positivism and cultural relativism simply incur the questions, “Whose law do we follow?” and “Whose culture is right?” Justifications for war, revolution, civil disobedience, and even keeping the law become arbitrary. Arbitrariness easily leads to moral chaos, such as in Israel under the judges, when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).³⁶ Once again, Solomon’s words in Proverbs 14:12 ring true: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

Like a house of cards, attacking the non-revelational epistemology of unbelievers will result in the crumbling of the entire worldview.³⁷ With no starting point from which to assert a truth claim, let alone attack Christianity, the wise unbeliever can only remain silent, lest he consistently proclaim foolishness (Prov. 12:23). Of course, following the internal critique the believer must present the true beginning for the preconditions for the intelligibility of the human experience. Ironic, then, that so many unbelievers haughtily deride Christianity as an irrational worldview. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” (1 Cor. 1:20)

³³ Within Christianity, indeterminism is most plainly seen in Arminianism, Molinism, and Open Theism.

³⁴ This excludes open theists, who could be incompatibilists. Compatibilism is the belief that free will and determinism are not logically incompatible.

³⁵ This is not to say that incompatibilism isn’t already obvious. All men know that LFW contradicts what they know from general revelation. Belief in LFW represents a desire for autonomy.

³⁶ The fact that some secular societies maintain moral order indicates the common grace of God, not the godness of these secular individuals.

³⁷ One of the most common objections to TAG asserts that TAG only proves theism and not necessarily the Christian worldview. Hence, the revelational epistemologies of the Islamic worldview or even a fictional theistic worldview are unharmed. This objection fails in that it fails to recognize that knowledge must be grounded in the mind of an actual deity, not a hypothetical deity, lest one only have hypothetical knowledge, which is no knowledge at all. Or as Michael Butler has stated, “Conceptual necessity does not guarantee ontological necessity.” Nevertheless, with regard to both known and unknown theistic worldviews, presuppositionalists should admit that an epistemological form of TAG is less persuasive than other types of internal critiques.

Attitude and Behavior

The wise apologist will take his attitude and behavior just as seriously as his epistemology, methodology, and arguments. Whether interacting with believers or unbelievers, a failure to act wisely will only perpetuate the many negative connotations associated with apologetics. Rather than being compassionate, articulate, and calm, those who defend the faith (or their version of the faith, at least) are often seen as prideful, argumentative, and vicious. Often times, however, the observer fails to recognize the significance of an issue and then falsely condemns the apologist with being argumentative or unnecessarily divisive. In either case, the apologist may need to alert himself or the observer to the following truths taught in Proverbs.

First, everyone is an apologist. The letters containing the most blatant commands to defend the faith (1 Peter, 2 Corinthians, Jude, 1 John) were not addressed to the clergy but to all Christians. In 1 John, for example, John writes to his “little children” on how to protect themselves from antichrists and false converts (1 John 2:1). Likewise, all Christians should behave like the Bereans in Acts 17 and “rightly [divide] the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15). Solomon conveys this most clearly in Proverbs 15:28: “the heart of the righteous studies how to answer.” Planning one’s apologia is a requirement of all those who claim Christ as Lord, not just the “trained professionals.”³⁸ See also Proverbs 18:15 and 15:14.

Second, apologists must argue. When two individuals disagree, the truth must be sought—not the assuagement of one’s pride. In scripture, truth is found through the interaction of finite minds. As quoted earlier, Proverbs 18:17 says that “The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him.” Likewise, Proverbs 25:8 instructs the wise to “debate your case” during disagreements, rather making hasty, baseless assertions (Prov. 29:20). Elsewhere in scripture do we find arguing used positively, in the pursuit of truth: “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord to those who might neglect repentance (Is. 1:18). Christ and Paul also frequently engaged in debate and discussion (Matt. 22:41-46, Luke 2:46, 20:20-26, John 8:48-59, Acts 17:2-3). See also 2 Tim. 4:2 and 2 Cor. 10:4-5.

Third, apologists must understand that unbeliever’s epistemology will force him to hold tight to irrational positions. Proverbs provides harsh words for the fool in this regard. “As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly.” (Prov. 26:11) Indeed, the wise apologist should learn to expect this kind of response, even after soundly refuting the unbeliever’s arguments. “Though you grind a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him” (Prov. 27:22). Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, the unbeliever will always remain unpersuaded, no matter how compelling the arguments.³⁹ The wise apologist, therefore, will learn to discern whether a debate is worth pursuing (Prov. 26:4).

Fourth, the apologist must realize that gentleness tears down walls that relentless, self-glorifying argumentation will always keep in place. “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Prov. 15:1). Solomon also points out that “any fool can start a quarrel” (Prov. 20:3) and that “the forcing of wrath produces strife” (30:33). The apologist will do well to examine his motive in engaging those in error: is it out of love or out of pride?

Fifth, apologists must recognize and accept correction in humility. Even the sharpest apologist will inevitably cause himself damage when he arrogantly refuses to admit error. As Solomon says, “Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is

³⁸ In 1 Peter 3:15, the word translated “defense” or “answer” is *apologia*, which refers to a legal-style defense.

³⁹ Cornelius Van Til once remarked that “the unbeliever will always follow the evidence, so long as it does not lead to the truth of Christianity.”

stupid” (Prov. 12:1; see also 15:32). Furthermore, “Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, and before honor is humility” (Prov. 18:12). Countless believers have had their ministries weakened or destroyed as the result of exalting their pride over the truth.⁴⁰

Sixth, apologists must recognize that sincere love requires will sometimes require rebuke, since love rejoices in truth (1 Cor. 13:6). “Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed” (Prov. 27:5). Wise friends will respect such correction: “He who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than he who flatters with the tongue” (Prov. 28:23). Also, we should love those whom we correct just as the Lord loves those whom He corrects (Prov. 3:12).

Seventh, believers are called to encourage and strengthen one another. By learning together and goading one another on to fear the Lord, believers heed Solomon’s wisdom in Proverbs 27:17. “As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.” Apart from such sharpening, the church will suffer greatly. “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14). See also Hosea 4:6 and Proverbs 29:18.

Conclusion

The book of Proverbs is quite possibly the richest apologetics text in all of scripture. By examining the way of the wise and the fool, Christians receive tremendous insight into the nature of all facets of biblical apologetics: epistemology, methodology, arguments, behavior, and attitude. The wise apologist would do well to study Proverbs and consider whether his apologetic is rooted in scripture or his own autonomous human reasoning. Is our trust in God founded in my own experiences or the work of scholars? Or do we trust God simply because of who He is? In answering, we could do no better than to repeat Proverbs 30:5.

Every word of God is pure;
He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him.
Do not add to His words,
Lest He rebuke you, and you be found a liar.

⁴⁰ A fine example of this is internet-based apologist “J.P. Holding” (www.tektonics.org), who is known more for his obnoxious, arrogant treatment of others than his careful historical research.

Appendix: A Defense of the Presuppositionalist Interpretation of Proverbs 1:7

As discussed at length, Proverbs 1:7 is a favorite proof-text of revelational epistemologists, namely presuppositionalists. Of course, such an interpretation assumes that the Hebrew word translated as knowledge, *da'at*, refers to justified, true belief.¹ In all of my time studying the works of Van Til, Bahnsen, Frame, and Butler, I have never seen a defense of this interpretation. This is perhaps curious, because even a cursory glance at many popular commentaries on Proverbs will reveal that the few who draw epistemological implications from this verse spend little time, if any, discussing these implications. Of course, this may say more about the modern evangelical scholar's interest in epistemology than anything else.

A few have challenged presuppositionalists in their use of Proverbs 1:7. Therefore, I would like to examine whether *da'at* refers to justified, true belief against two common arguments.²

The first argument states that *da'at* refers only to "moral knowledge," which is why some Bible versions may translate *da'at* as "wisdom" instead of "knowledge." Consequently, the argument states that Solomon only had practical skill for living in mind and not epistemology when he penned verses like Proverbs 1:7, 1:29, 2:6, and 9:10. The presuppositionalist may respond in several ways.

First, *da'at* and its root, *yāda'*, is defined and used epistemologically. In the Old Testament, *yāda'* is used 944 times to describe a variety of situations in which a person believes, understands, perceives, recognizes, or discerns something about reality.³ Concerning *da'at*, the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* defines it as "knowledge gained in various ways by the senses" and calls it a "general term for knowledge."⁴ Furthermore, *da'at* is used when describing technical knowledge (1 Kings 7:14), discernment (Ps. 119:66), moral cognition (Gen. 2:9,17), unintentional deeds (Deut. 4:42), and mistaken opinions (Prov. 19:2). God has *da'at* because nothing is hidden from Him (Ps. 139:1-18), and He teaches *da'at* to man (Ps. 94:10). In each of these cases, *da'at* refers to knowledge that is not limited to that of an practical, moral nature. It seems strange that Solomon would use such an epistemologically-rich term if he did not intend to convey an epistemological statement.

The *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* seems less enthusiastic about *da'at* as an epistemological term, choosing to emphasize its theological dimension (the necessity of *da'at* in one's relationship with God).⁵ NIDOTTE still discusses

¹ "Justified, true belief" is the commonly accepted epistemological definition of knowledge.

² I want to very heavily emphasize, however, that Proverbs 1:7 is not the sole proof-text for presuppositionalist epistemology. Indeed, the concept that reverential submission to Yahweh is the beginning of justified, true belief may be easily deduced from Romans 1 and Colossians 2:3, as well as the concept of God's omniscience and sovereignty. Therefore, presuppositionalist epistemology does not live or die depending on whether the common presuppositionalist interpretation of Proverbs 1:7 is true.

³ Harris Laird, Gleason Archer and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 366.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, Volume 2*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 411.

da'at as a derivative of *yd'* (a different spelling of *yāda'*), which means to “observe, realize, find out, recognize, perceive, care about, be(come) acquainted with, have sexual relations with, choose, (come to) understand, know, have insight; ...”⁶ The derivative *da'at* is specifically defined as “knowledge, ability, knowledge of, insight ...”⁷ Commenting on the wide range of usage of *yd'* in the Old Testament, NIDOTTE says the following.

The meanings of *yd'* are difficult to relate to one another. They range from sensory perception to intellectual process to practical skill to careful attention to close relationship to physical intimacy. ... It is probable that precision in nuancing is not to be sought in such words in isolation; only the context enables some distinctions to emerge.⁸

As the second response will show, the meaning of *da'at* does clearly emerge in light of the context. NIDOTTE also makes an interesting point regarding the act of knowing:

In the broadest sense, *yd'* means to take various aspects of the world of one's experience into the self, including the resultant relationship with that which is known. The fundamentally relational character of knowing (over against a narrow intellectual sense) can be discerned, not least in that both God and human beings can be subject and object of the vb.⁹

This actually closely mirrors the “triperspectivalism” of presuppositional apologist John Frame. In *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, Frame spends a great deal of time explaining that knowing is always an act done in relation to God's word, the creation, and the self. Frame says that “they are so closely related to each other that knowing law, world, and self are all the same process, seen from different ‘perspectives.’”¹⁰ This relational nature of knowing fits nicely with Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10, because knowledge is understood only in light of Yahweh. The *Baker Commentary* on Proverbs agrees:

As a beginning, [Proverbs 1:7] claims that there is no knowledge apart from a proper attitude and relationship to Yahweh. Fear of Yahweh is foundational to knowledge, which here functions as a close synonym to wisdom. In this way, the book acknowledges the radically relational and theocentric nature of knowledge/wisdom. This is important especially in the light of the fact that the wisdom literature does not hammer away this idea. Many of the proverbs in the latter part of the book cite experience, observation, or human reason as the grounds for their advice, and this has led some scholars to suppose that wisdom, at least in its early stages, is a “secular” enterprise. However, the present form of the book is thoroughly theological so that even human observation depends on divinity in a foundational way.¹¹

⁶ *Ibid.*, 409.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 410.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), 73.

¹¹ Tremper Longman III, *Proverbs (Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms)* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 100-101.

Continuing the theme of perspectives, the *Handbook on Wisdom Books and Psalms* quotes Clifford as saying that Proverbs has an epistemological, ethical, and religious dimension.¹² As with Frame's triperspectivalism, each dimension must be understood in relation to the other. A proper way of knowing must presuppose a dependence on Yahweh. Furthermore, a proper way of knowing is inherently ethical because it entails how one ought to think. Frame observes the following:

To ask a person to justify a belief is to ask an ethical question. It is to ask what ethical right that person has to believe such and such; it is to ask whether and why we are *ethically obligated* to believe it. What is the "pressure" we feel to accept a justified belief? ... The pressure, I think, can be understood only as a moral pressure, as the pressure of conscience.¹³

Having examined the inter-related perspectives of knowing, we see that Proverbs 1:7 encapsulates them all beautifully. The person who *knows* is *obligated* to fear *Yahweh*. Epistemology, ethics, and theology all intersect at the heart of wisdom. Consequently, to proclaim Yahweh as the beginning of wisdom is to make a statement about how we know, what we ought to know, and who God is. To deny the epistemological component of wisdom, then, is to deny wisdom itself. The critic of presuppositionalism has found himself in the same position as the unbeliever: presupposing the very thing he argues against.

A second and perhaps more lethal response to this first charge involves the context. Proverbs presents a vivid picture of the wise and the fool. As discussed at length, foolishness is an epistemology with devastating and unavoidable implications for how the fool reasons and behaves. Paul explains in Romans 1:22 that the fool's self-glorifying epistemology leads him to consider himself wise, when in reality he is the exact opposite—a fool, and precisely because his epistemology is so irrational. Likewise, Psalm 14 states that the *fool* does not believe in God. This unbelief makes him a worker of iniquity—one who is corrupt and does not seek God. The psalmist asks in verse four, "Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge?" In other words, unbiblical epistemologies are irrational and sinful, and this defines what it means to be foolish. Since wisdom is the opposite of foolishness, we can deduce that wisdom entails rationality and righteousness. Rationality requires a sound epistemology, therefore wisdom itself must be an epistemology. Therefore, to say that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom is to say that Yahweh is the foundation of true epistemology.

Perhaps some would grant that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of justified, true belief, but this was not Solomon's intention when writing Proverbs. But how could Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, write a book about wisdom and foolishness and ignore the epistemological consequences?

Furthermore, Proverbs 1:7 is regarded as the summary of the preamble of Proverbs (Prov. 1:1-7), which makes it a very important verse. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* calls it the "quintessential expression of the basic spiritual grammar for understanding the book."¹⁴ If in that one verse the core difference between the wise and fool is described then it no doubt must encompass all of the differences between the wise and the fool. Since the wise and the fool have different epistemologies, Proverbs 1:7 must entail an epistemological

¹² Daniel Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 221.

¹³ John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), 109.

¹⁴ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 180.

dimension. Of course, I would go even further and say that the core difference between the wise and the fool is epistemological, therefore the core verse of Proverbs that explains the core difference between the wise and the fool should be explicitly epistemological.

We see again how epistemology ties in so strongly with ethics. Drawing again upon Frame's clever observation, we see that epistemology is ethical because biblical epistemology shows us not only what *is* the right way to think but how men *ought* to think. After all, the intellectual suicide of the unbeliever stems from an ethical pitfall—namely his rejection of the true knowledge-giver in favor of his own autonomy. Once again, even if the presuppositionalist conceded that *da'at* is chiefly ethical, epistemological implications are only a short leap away.

A third counter-argument considers Proverbs 1:7 within the context of the topics in the rest of the book: education (22:6, 1:5), counsel (11:14), instruction (12:1), discretion (1:4, 2:11, 5:2), discernment (2:3), understanding (1:2, 2:2), study (15:28), truth (3:3), investigation (25:2), legal defense (25:8-10), certainty (22:21), and perception (1:2, 20:12). Each of these practices or disciplines must correspond to God's created reality if they are to have any value. Justifying such a correspondence theory of truth, of course, requires a cogent epistemology.

Not surprisingly, Solomon provides the basis for all of the above disciplines almost immediately in Proverbs 1:7. NICOT agrees by pointing out that "beginning" in Proverbs 1:7 refers to temporality rather than quality. The fear of the Lord is not merely the "choice part" of wisdom. Rather, it is necessarily prior to understanding the book of Proverbs:

However, the temporally first step in this case is not on a horizontal axis that can be left behind but on a vertical axis on which all else rests. It denotes both the *initium* and the *principium*. What the alphabet is to reading, notes to reading music, and numerals to mathematics, the fear of the Lord is to attaining the revealed knowledge of this book.¹⁵

Fourth, if we view wisdom, understanding, and knowledge in the book of Proverbs as solely "moral," 3:19-20 presents an odd picture. In these verses we have non-moral actions being accomplished through the aforementioned trifecta. Would breaking up the depths not require a knowledge of *how* the depths must be broken up? "Practical skills for living as Yahweh intends" are simply not in view here. My intention here is not to get readers to abandon the moral component of the trifecta but to simply acknowledge a more robust, encompassing definition of the terms.

Fifth, NICOT presents understanding, which is closely tied to knowledge and wisdom (Prov. 9:10) as being "the faculty of the intellectual discernment and interpretation . . ." ¹⁶ Moreover, "it refers to the faculty of reason and intelligence applied to the content of the sage's teaching." ¹⁷ Finally, NICOT wisely points to Prov. 3:5 as a refutation of the "autonomous use of the intellect." ¹⁸ Autonomy always leads to intellectual death and therefore knowledge "falsely so-called" (1 Tim. 6:20), which is why we must lean not on our own understanding but on the true knowledge-giver.

The second argument some Christians may present against a presuppositional reading of Proverbs 1:7 involves the "fear of the Lord." Presuppositionalists argue that all men know God

¹⁵ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 181.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

as the authority and therefore are epistemologically subservient to Him. In order to have knowledge at all, all men must fear the Lord, even if they suppress this fear. In many proverbs, however, Solomon seems to present the fear of the Lord as something possessed only by the righteous.¹⁹ For example, to fear the Lord is to hate evil (Prov. 8:13), but fools obviously do not hate evil. Also, Proverbs 1:29 presents the fear of the Lord as something that men choose—not something that all men have through general revelation. How does the presuppositionalist resolve this seemingly crippling contradiction?²⁰

The simplest response is that in one sense unbelievers do not fear the Lord and in another sense they do. Unbelievers do suppress the knowledge of God and therefore act as though they do not know God, and even claim that they do not know God, but this does not change the fact that they do know God. The unbeliever is simply lying to himself (and therefore is bearing false witness to the truth and is without excuse). In doing so he *appears* to reject the fear of the Lord. In other words, he outwardly denies what he *must* inwardly believe. His fundamental presuppositional commitment is to himself, and yet apart from a presuppositional commitment to his dependence on God he could not operate in this world. Greg Bahnsen once noted that his unbelieving doctor was able to perform a successful heart surgery on him because the Christian worldview is true, not the doctor's. Of course, principles such as induction, the reliability of the senses, logic, memory, other minds, and so on, are usually taken for granted. Most people do not stop to consider what justification they might have for these transcendentals, and even if they have they cannot articulate a justification apart from scripture.²¹ Yet they do know the justification through general revelation: All men know that God provides the transcendentals because all men know that “in Him we live and move and have our being,” (Acts 17:28). All men know that God is the creator and sustainer—and apart from this knowledge of God as the “Greater Transcendental” man could not justify his use of the “Lesser Transcendentals.” In other words, it is not enough to be made in God's image (and therefore possess rationality). We must actually fear the Lord to have knowledge. We must actually submit to Him.

Another response to the conundrum of unbelievers fearing the Lord invokes common grace. Bahnsen quotes Van Til on this matter as follows:

[The unbeliever] has within him the knowledge of God by virtue of his creation in the image of God. But this idea of God is suppressed by his false principle, in turn, suppressed by the restraining power of God's common grace ... And by the striving of the Spirit ... their hostility is curbed in some measure ... And as such they can cooperate by virtue of the ethical restraint of common grace.²²

Though the unbeliever seems to dwell in irreconcilable tension, he does find himself in possession of some knowledge through God's grace. Furthermore, since all knowledge given to sinful men is an act of grace, we may also deduce from biblical epistemology that faith itself comes through grace alone. The Holy Spirit, therefore, plays the crucial role in restoring one's

¹⁹ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament)*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 181.

²⁰ This criticism is actually common to presuppositionalism in general: how can the unbeliever simultaneously fear the Lord and not fear the Lord?

²¹ Man needs to have scripture in order to justify his justification for knowledge. Nevertheless, apart from knowing this justification he remains justified in his true beliefs and therefore has knowledge. Therefore, biblical epistemology is overtly externalist.

²² Greg Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2004), 39

epistemology, just as He restores one's soul. As Bahnsen wisely said, "Christ is not just the way back to the Father, He is the way back to the Father's world."²³

It is worth noting that some commentators recognize the epistemological implications of the fear of the Lord. NICOT states that the "fear of the Lord ... is the book's theological and epistemological foundation."²⁴ NICOT also affirms the significance of the fear of the Lord in general revelation in a quote by R.N. Whybray: "[The fear of the Lord refers] to a standard of moral conduct known and accepted by men in general."²⁵ Despite knowing this standard, men suppress their fear of the Lord in order to evade His authority.

The *Word Biblical Commentary* quotes G. von Rad as saying that "Israel attributes to the fear of God ... a highly important function in respect to human knowledge. She was ... of the opinion that effective knowledge about God is the only thing that puts man into a right relationship with the objects of his perception."²⁶ A later excursus on the fear of the Lord provides another illuminating quote by G. von Rad that neatly summarizes many of the points propounded in this paper.

The thesis that all human knowledge comes back to the question about commitment to God is a statement of penetrating perspicacity. It has, of course, been so worn by centuries of Christian teaching that it has to be seen anew in all its provocative pungency. In the most concise phraseology it encompasses a wide range of intellectual content and can itself be understood only as the result of a long process of thought. It contains in a nutshell the whole Israelite theory of knowledge.²⁷

In conclusion, we see that the two main charges, although worth answering, fail to nullify Proverbs 1:7 as a proof-text for presuppositionalist epistemology. The first charge seems to stem from an unwarranted prejudice against epistemology, or at least an unfortunate ignorance towards epistemology. Examining the Hebrew as well as the context quickly dismantles the charge. The case is further strengthened in light of Frame and Clifford's perspectivalist, relational view of knowing. The second charge merely misunderstands presuppositionalism and has already been addressed by Bahnsen and Van Til. Therefore, a "wise" reading of Proverbs will appreciate the seventh verse in its fullest epistemological sense.

²³ A paraphrase of a statement Bahnsen made during an unknown lecture.

²⁴ Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15 (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament,)* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 180.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁶ Roland Murphy, *Proverbs (Word Biblical Commentary,)* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 5.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 256.