About Greg Bahnsen

Greg L. Bahnsen became interested in apologetics by reading the writings of Cornelius Van Til in high school and would go on to develop his presuppositional apologetic. He was exceptionally gifted intellectually and graduated magna cum laude with his B.A. in philosophy and winning the John Bunyan Smith award for his grades. He simultaneously earned two degrees at Westminster Theological Seminary (WTS), a Master of Divinity and Master of Theology, as well as prizes in apologetics before moving on to University of Southern California (USC) to earn his PhD in Philosophy, specializing in the theory of knowledge. He served as an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, was the associate professor of Apologetics and Ethics at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) and scholar in residence at The Southern California Center for Christian Studies. He suffered with lifelong medical problems and died at the early age of forty-seven due to complications after heart surgery on December 11, 1995.

As a teacher, Kenneth L. Gentry attests that Bahnsen challenged his students and taught them how to think critically. Pastorally, he showed the relevance of scripture to all of life and was intensely committed to shepherding the flock entrusted to him. He encouraged people to stand firm in their convictions and trust God against all opposition. Bahnsen was passionate about building a Biblically based method of distinctively Reformed apologetics and he respectfully critiqued other Reformed theologians, such as Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley, in their methodological approach. He commented, “Their

1 OMICS International, “Greg Bahnsen.” [n.d.]. Bahnsen studied under Van Til at WTS.
effort to defend our common faith means well. But apologetics cannot be evaluated simply like an awkward Christmas gift received from a child. It is not simply ‘the thought that counts’ here.” Bahnsen’s son, David, writes of him that “he would have torn down walls with his bare hands for me.” David attests that he was a caring, warm-hearted man who had very few enemies—maintaining good relationships even with those with whom he disagreed—both Christian and non-Christian.\(^5\) Apologist, Greg Habermas, though he disagreed methodologically, invited him to lecture at Liberty University and deeply respected Bahnsen’s scholarly training, accomplishments and commitment to the Lord.\(^6\)

### Bahnsen’s *Magnum Opus*

Bahnsen’s major work in review here is *Presuppositional Apologetics: Stated and Defended*, published post-humorously in 2008 by The American Vision and Covenant Media Press. It was his *magnum opus* and completely sold out after a few months of release. Bahnsen’s basic premise was that “apologetics must be exercised upon the infallible and presupposed authority of the Word of Christ in Scripture. Apologetics does not first do obeisance to human philosophy and science and then proceed to encompass God in its sphere of reverence.”\(^7\) Bahnsen continues the tradition of VanTillian (after Westminster Theologian Cornelius Van Til) styled presuppositional apologetics at WTS. He argued that because we defend a genuine system of authority which is known via divine revelation, God’s Word stands in judgement over all and it is we, not God, who are ‘in the docks.’\(^8\) Christianity is not to be presented as a set of piecemeal truths, but as a unit and complete worldview. Thus, the argument must be *transcendental* (relating to a spiritual or nonphysical realm) in character and aim to show the impossibility of the contrary—applying the truths of God’s revelation to the unbeliever by setting forth the pervasive, positive evidence of God and performing an internal critique of the unbeliever’s worldview to show that it destroys the possibility of human knowledge itself.\(^9\)

### Setting Christ as Holy in our Hearts and Apologetic

In 1 Peter 3:15, the command to be ready to give a reasoned defense for the hope in us is under the condition that we must first “set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts.”

\(^5\) Bahnsen, “In Memory” (blog), Dec. 11, 2015.
\(^6\) See Habermas, “Greg Bahnsen, John Warwick Montgomery, and Evidential Apologetics.”
\(^7\) Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 3.
\(^8\) Term borrowed from Lewis, *God in the Dock*, 244.
Bahnsen desired to honour the Lordship of Christ in all our apologetic endeavours of thinking and argumentation. Thus, he said that what we present in the defence of the faith must not be supposedly ‘neutral’ theories, non-committed logic, inferences and assumptions from secular learning but rather, every thought must be submitted to the Word of Christ.\(^{10}\) In seeking to defend Christianity, the apologist must not operate from the position that the converse is true in order to argue back to faith. Rather, the task of the apologist is to demonstrate that without Christian presuppositions there is no basis for intelligible use of facts or logic and all human knowledge and interpretation fail.\(^{11}\)

Bahnsen critiqued non-presuppositional defenses as less than consistently Biblical because they seek to build defenses on some philosophical authority apart from God’s Word. Also, they tend to be too concessive to the unbeliever, merely aiming to simply show Christianity as \textit{probably} true. However, probability—still leaving the possibility of the contrary as room for escape—does not leave the unbeliever “\textit{without excuse},” (Rom. 1:20) but suggests implicitly that they have the prerogative and ability to stand in judgement over God’s Word.\(^{12}\) He said,

\begin{quote}
“an apologetic approach that does not appeal to the principles or notions of the unbeliever to get off the ground, but does appeal to the suppressed knowledge of God all men have as a result of God’s clear revelation and does base its argumentation in the self-attesting word of Scripture, an apologetic that refuses to waver as to the truth of Scripture and appeals to man as the responsible image of God to admit the impossibility of knowledge without the revealed God, an apologetic that looks to the sovereign grace of the Holy Spirit for success in changing men’s hearts and minds and sees faith as a moral prerequisite to understanding—in short, a presuppositional apologetic—is demanded by the Bible itself.”\(^{13}\)
\end{quote}

The second half of this book deals with responding to the other apologetic methodologies of Gordon Clarke, Edward J. Carnell, and Francis Schaeffer, in which he aims to show them to be incomplete and inconsistent. His thorough interaction with these other approaches was also helpful in clarifying the distinctiveness of his own. I would redirect the reader

\(^{10}\) Bahnsen, \textit{Presuppositional Apologetics}, 26, 125.  
\(^{11}\) Bahnsen, \textit{Presuppositional Apologetics}, 14.  
\(^{12}\) Bahnsen, \textit{Presuppositional Apologetics}, 23.  
\(^{13}\) Bahnsen, \textit{Presuppositional Apologetics}, 26.
to go read them for themselves to see how he critiqued and responded to other methodologies.\textsuperscript{14}

\section*{Dispelling the Myth of Neutrality}

Bahnsen rejected the notion of neutrality as no one can be completely objective and value-free in deciding an issue of truth. Every person when they collect evidence, arrange, and evaluate it, does so in response to their personality and past experience so that a strong element of subjectivity is involved. If one could be free of interpretative principles to treat all ‘facts’ as if they had no pre-interpretation attached to them, then they could never start or make contact with these ‘facts’ because they would have a blank mind working on blank impressions.\textsuperscript{15} No one is neutral. We all have a bias.

Everyone has presuppositions. Bahnsen, along with Van Til, recognized that these affected the way ‘facts’ would be interpreted and thus must be the primary target of an apologetic method. Because the unbeliever lives in God’s world regardless of whether they ‘believe’ it or not, this means that their system will eventually break down when tested and cannot be ultimately consistent—for contrary to their claims, they are not autonomous. They will, of necessity, have to borrow from a Christian worldview in order to deny it. Today, we see some apologists such as Ravi Zacharias employ this style of argumentation effectively to expose the inconsistency in atheistic worldviews and it proves to be useful to the layperson. This understanding that there is no neutrality and underlying presuppositions must be exposed to have any meaningful interaction about worldviews is essential to the apologist.

\section*{Understanding the Fall and Suppression of Truth}

Bahnsen’s apologetic is built on the Reformed understanding of the state of fallen humanity. The unbeliever knows God, in a sense that leaves them responsible for their intellectual rebellion, but also does not know God, in a sense that would bring them salvation.\textsuperscript{16} God has clearly revealed Himself to all people through creation so that they all have the same true metaphysical information \textit{(metaphysical: of or relating to the transcendent or to a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses)} and do not begin with a ‘leap’ but rather in either submissive obedience or rebellious disobedience. The fact that people suppress and mishandle God’s clear revelation compromises their metaphysics and epistemology \textit{(epistemology: the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope)}, but does not mean that they start from a blank

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{14} See Bahnsen, \textit{Presuppositional Apologetics}, 133—268.
\bibitem{15} Bahnsen, \textit{Presuppositional Apologetics}, 88–89.
\end{thebibliography}
position of neutrality. "The beginning of philosophy is not a subjectivist guessing game but a matter of ethics."Simply put, the sinner's suppression of truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18) means that they improperly perceive the true nature of reality and in their ability to know and receive the truth is compromised due to their rebellion from it.

When humankind fell, it replaced God's authority with self-sufficiency. The Fall did not take away people's reasoning and moral decision-making, but rather it marred it and gave them a new perverted direction. Because of humanity's rebellion, "the restoration of man to fellowship with God and to constructive use of his capacities requires God's gracious redemption, which is communicated to us by special revelation in Scripture." Bahnsen comments,

"As a covenant-breaker the unbeliever will twist everything around him, distorting the truth in the interest of his unrighteous rebellion. He will with futility try various schemes that combine rationality and irrationality (unity and diversity) in order to replace the truths of creation and providence. While conveniently overlooking facts, becoming inconsistent with his principles, and not being able to give an intelligible account of fact and logic on his espoused presuppositions, the unbeliever will charge Christianity with being unfactual or illogical."

And how often do we see exactly this happen!? People who start off with an aversion to being responsible to any higher power conveniently overlook facts and seem to reinterpret clear evidence with their own distorted lenses. It can seem like there is no point of contact with the unbeliever to make any progress.

The Point of Contact—A Head-on Collision

However, we always have an apologetical point of contact with the unbeliever, even when they profess to have different ultimate standards, which is the actual state of affairs—the imago Dei (image of God), the suppressed knowledge of God, and the revelation of God in the created order. Bahnsen cites Paul's example in Acts 17 in Athens as not appealing to a common outlook but rather the ignorance of his hearers. He points out "that which you worship in ignorance, I proclaim to you." It is to this that Bahnsen

17 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 85.
18 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 16.
19 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 18–19.
20 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 19.
21 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 44.
argues that apologists must appeal, not a feigned religious neutrality or common interpretation of things, but rather the two worldviews must come to a point of head-on collision. We must proclaim clearly that which is worshipped in ignorance.

Bahnsen argues, to take a non-presuppositional approach fails to take into account the need for regeneration and faith before understanding and knowledge. By reversing this order, one would put submission to God’s Word as secondary, seeing demonstration as the basis for faith and independent argument as the source of conviction instead of the work of the Holy Spirit. He points out that coming near to God and having knowledge of Him does not lead to faith, but rather faith enables one to draw near (Heb. 11:6; John 7:17, cf. John 6:29). With this, Bahnsen agrees with Augustine that understanding is the reward of faith.22 “Right thinking is the result of right living, and hence the apologist cannot expect to convince the unbeliever who continues in his rebellion and intellectual sinfulness of the truth by mere rational evidences and arguments.”23 Bahnsen was convicted that the ends do not justify making use of methodologies which operate in disagreement with the teaching of Scripture.24

How Do We Know What We Know?

He stated that we cannot begin with our method to distinguish knowledgeable beliefs (epistemology) and then proceed to find out the extent of our knowledge. To do so would be to start with a generalized arbitrary criterion which has not been given any reasonable warrant. In practice, one knows how to decide which epistemological method to choose on the basis of its success in leading to knowledgeable beliefs. However, this already assumes that we can recognize these items of knowledgeable beliefs. We would already need to know something about the extent of our knowledge before we could figure out the criterion of knowledge!

So, our rules of epistemology would end up being adapted to our cases of knowledge and thus the question cannot be answered in isolation from metaphysics.25 “So then, to some degree what is known is coordinated with how we determine whether we know; one cannot proceed to answer the epistemological question without simultaneously rendering decisions on the metaphysical question. One cannot gain an

23 Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 68.
epistemological position untainted by metaphysical commitment.” There is no neutral ground—questions of epistemology assume answers to metaphysics.

“When one outlook uses an epistemological method or standard to argue with the metaphysical beliefs of the other, the second school will counter with its own epistemological method which refutes the metaphysical beliefs of the first. If they attempt to argue over each other’s epistemology, it will be in terms of their correspondingly different metaphysics. That is, their arguments will not simply be over how well each other has developed his philosophy, but over what kind of philosophy should be developed.”

He argued that it is impossible for the Christian and the unbeliever to come to a common epistemological ground before deriving answers about metaphysics—since the two are interdependent, the impasse must be removed by coordinating them, not by subordinating the former to the latter.

Truth and Ultimate Authority—Standing on God’s Word

Every system must have unproven assumptions from which reasoning begins then proceeds to conclusions. Therefore, all arguments over issues of ultimate truth and reality will boil down to an appeal to ultimate authorities. The circularity at this level is unavoidable, for if the authority appealed to must be justified, then it is not actually an ultimate authority. Thus, when ultimate authorities are challenged, the argument must of necessity become circular—for nothing is more authoritative than an ‘ultimate’ authority.

Bahnsen continues later that when Christians and non-Christians argue, they seek to be coherent on their use of true premises. However, “neither one will be able to prove the truth of each and every premise used, for that would lead to an infinite regress and make argument impossible (since it could never get started). Every argument must begin with some foundational, unproved premises.” He continued that, “When two people, Christian and unbeliever, are arguing, their ultimate authorities will be distinguishable by what they refuse to impugn or contradict in the long run… that which governs and qualifies all higher movements of thought and argumentation, constitutes their authority.”

Thus, Bahnsen was convinced that only God’s grace would rectify the situation of an unbeliever and until then, they would continue to see Christian reasoning as absurd.

26 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 81.
27 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 81–82.
28 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 78.
29 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 87. (279–280)
30 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 279–280.
31 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 87.
(1 Cor. 2:14). It is through hearing God’s Word that faith is given (Rom. 10:17). Thus, the Word should be the foundation of our apologetic appeal and challenge to unbeliever. Hebrews 4:12 declares that God’s Word judges the innermost thoughts of the heart—it puts thoughts of the unbeliever on trial. But what does this look like? Does the apologist then read off a list of passages of scripture? Here is where Bahnsen’s work has advanced the presuppositional method of doing apologetics in practice. Prior to him, there were very few, if any, widely known presuppositionalists in public debate.

**Bahnsen’s Method in Practice**

Bahnsen set out to employ his methodology not by thoughtlessly rattling off scripture or shoving the Bible down people’s throats but rather by taking the system of Christian beliefs found in Calvinism and applying them to his apologetic methodology. He did this by pushing the antithesis in order to show the impossibility of the contrary. He aimed to show that the atheistic worldview cannot be consistent with its own assumptions and did this in several ways. I will briefly focus on only two and leave the reader to explore the rest through Bahnsen’s works themselves.

1. **The Impossibility of the Contrary**

Firstly, it cannot account for the laws of logic such as the law of non-contradiction which make argument possible. The autonomous thinker cannot appeal to the law of non-contradiction in order to support their use of it—for it would be to prove the conclusion by appealing to the conclusion. Secondly, they cannot rationally support the observed uniformity of nature which would not be expected in a random chaotic universe but is perfectly congruent with the state of affairs according to Scripture. No genuine system of truth is possible in a chance universe and connections or relations between various states of affairs or thoughts would be impossible, and thus no intelligible use of logic could develop. “If fate lies behind all historical eventuation, the structure of the world and our mental functions as well as all occurrences, changes, and continuities would be irrational.

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33 Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 56.
34 His debate in 1985 with Gordon Stein (President of American Rationalist Federation, Vice-President of the Freedom from Religion Foundation and Atheists United) is famous as one of the earliest applications of this method in a major debate and a fine example of what it looks like in practice. Bahnsen, using the transcendental argument for God left Stein ἀναπολογήτους (Rom. 1:20)—without a reasoned defence. This debate is available in its entirety for free online via YouTube and other sources. A transcript of the debate can be found here: [http://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/Bahnsen-Stein_Transcript.pdf](http://andynaselli.com/wp-content/uploads/Bahnsen-Stein_Transcript.pdf)
and never necessarily connected. The autonomous man is at a loss to generate rationality in an irrational world."^36

Furthermore, if the laws of being are in accord with the laws of thought in the autonomous thinker's mind, and because their mind operates in terms of the law of non-contradiction, it should follow that reality as a whole is rational to the core.

"Yet by placing irrationality behind everything (i.e., denying that there is a determinate mind and purpose controlling everything) the autonomous thinker comes into direct contradiction with himself: he simultaneously affirms the rationality of all reality (it must be so since his mind must be able to think through the facts) and its ultimate irrationality (there is no sovereign God according to whose plan history proceeds)."^37

All the autonomous thinker can do is assert the law of non-contradiction and uniformity in nature, but they cannot justify these things—why should they exist in a universe which comes from chaos? Yet these are the very things which make even argument possible! So, to argue against God, one must at a certain basic level assume He exists to argue against Him.

2. Science Alone Cannot Answer the Questions

Moreover, Bahnsen observed that atheists operate on the basis that the less one knows the less certain they should be about their judgments and thus, without omniscience, no one can have unqualified truth.\(^38\) "Even if we arbitrarily grant the assumption that the brute facts are causally related, the autonomous man would require omniscience if he were to be sure that an occurrence is actually caused by what appears to be causing it and not something apparently unrelated. The appeal to causality is not only rootless, it is also unhelpful."\(^39\) So then, what assurance does the atheistic scientist have that the actual state of affairs is conducive to science itself? Why is it not otherwise? Scientific methodology is incapable of verifying the hypothesis of the conditions necessary for science or generate explanations for it.\(^40\)

"In other words, the consistent naturalistic scientist entertains an irrational belief so that his ‘rational’ endeavor can get started. In this prescientific realm of metaphysics and epistemology we must depend on either speculation or revelation, and only an authoritative revelation can deliver us from the subjective relativism of human

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38 Bahnsen, *Presuppositional Apologetics*, 99. Bahnsen furthered this argument later in the book that, "the only person who could deny that there is a self-sufficient knower would have to be a self-sufficient knower himself!" And, "The man who precludes any revelation from a self-sufficient knower commits himself (in principle, even if not in consistent practice) to skepticism." He then concludes that reasoning and knowledge are only possible in an atmosphere of Revelation. See 269—273.
opinion and unimportant logical tautologies. Yet the rejection of revelational epistemology constitutes the core of autonomous thinking. If science proceeds autonomously, then the only thing that can be discovered in the world is man’s own interpretative and ordering activity; nature merely echoes back the thoughts of the autonomous man. Hence he ends up accepting his own revelation, based on his own authority.41

Thus, Bahnsen shows that all persons depend ultimately on an appeal to authority—so an objection against a Christian’s use of ‘authority’ is unwarranted and the claim to be ‘unbiased’ cannot be held.

Bahnsen’s Contributions to Presuppositional Apologetics

Bahnsen’s contributions to the field of presuppositional apologetics are invaluable. He demonstrated how to attack at the fundamental worldview foundations upon which all discussion and seeking of truth must rest. His method encourages fresh vigour and confidence for believers to stand firm upon Biblical truths in responding to atheist objections and takes into account the theology of the nature of humankind after the Fall and necessity of the Holy Spirit.42 He also taught the apologist’s need for dependence on prayer to accomplish what only the Spirit of God can do—a vital area which is often downplayed or simply not stressed in much of contemporary apologetics.43

His life and relationships with those he came in contact with teaches us how to speak the truth in love and gentleness. His contributions in his writings, books and debates are a rich source of learning for many who continue in the presuppositional approach today that is consistent with Reformed convictions. It is unfortunate that he passed away before he could do further work and development in this field—but there have since been men such as K. Scott Oliphint and John M. Frame who have continued to further the apologetical methodology at Westminster Theological Seminary plus many beyond who utilize the transcendental argument. Greg L. Bahnsen leaves a lasting legacy, and his works are well worth the time to study.

42 Bahnsen also had some helpful comments regarding the use of language in apologetics—it is essential that the apologist make clear communication and definition of terms a high priority to avoid unwanted miscommunication. See Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 120—121.
43 Bahnsen, Presuppositional Apologetics, 68.
Bibliography


