

## 22

# Reasons for Hope: Integrating Diverse Arguments in Apologetics

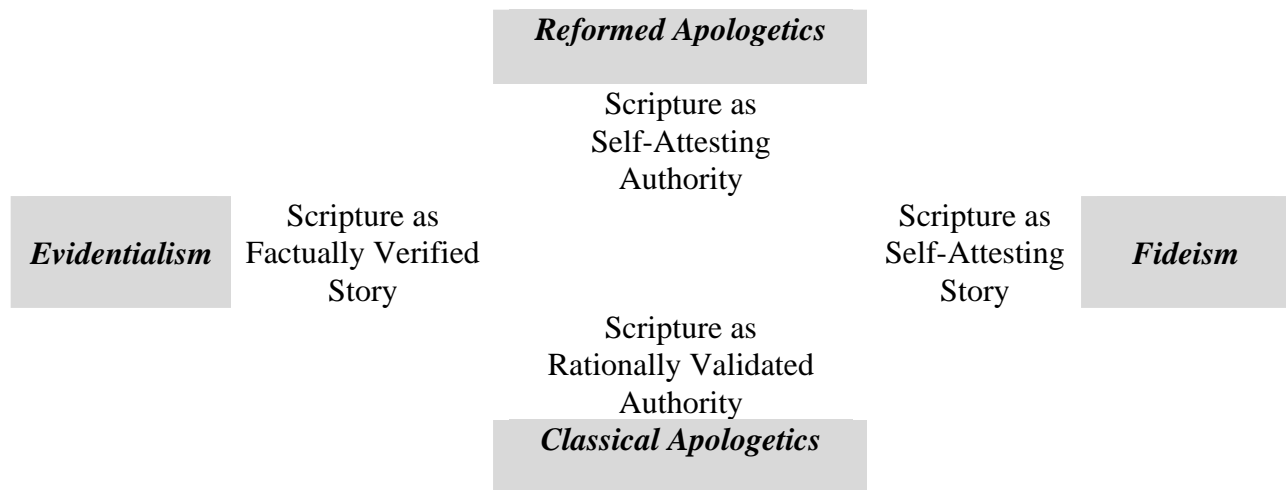
We have argued that the four major approaches all have value, and that each can incorporate insights of the others if they are developed in a sufficiently broad fashion. The real test of this claim is whether the diverse arguments favored by these approaches can be used together in some way.

## Scripture as Truth

While all four models view Scripture as revealing truth from God, they differ in how they approach persuading non-Christians to accept that truth. Classical apologists tend to view Scripture as the *subject* of apologetics: the purpose of apologetics is to present an argument that concludes with the divine authority of Scripture. Evidentialists seek to conclude their argument in the same way, but they typically begin by viewing Scripture as the *source* of apologetics; that is, the argument uses Scripture as an historical source of facts or evidences from which the central claims of Scripture concerning Jesus Christ can be defended. Reformed apologists, especially in the tradition of Clark and Van Til, argue that Scripture should be viewed as the

*standard* of apologetics: it lays down the theological basis and ground rules for apologetics, and the apologist must present it as the self-attesting authority or standard for all truth. Fideists view Scripture as the *story* of apologetics: it should not be defended, but instead should be used to tell the self-attesting story of Jesus Christ.

### Four Perspectives on Scripture



Reformed and classical apologetics, both of which make a normative perspective primary, view Scripture as the authority to which apologetics points. The difference is that Reformed apologetics views Scripture's authority as self-attesting, and therefore in need of no validation such as is offered in classical apologetics. But surely these two perspectives are reconcilable. To say that Scripture does not *need* rational validation is not the same as saying that it does not or cannot *have* rational validation. Likewise, to say that apologetics should offer rational validation for Scripture is not to assert that Scripture is not self-attesting. Rather, the classical apologist can (and often does) view his apologetic argument as helping people recognize Scripture as the divinely inspired and therefore self-attesting Word of God. Moreover, the presuppositional argument is itself a kind of rational validation: to argue that Scripture

provides the only coherent or intelligible basis for affirming truth, meaning, or moral values is an indirect form of validation.

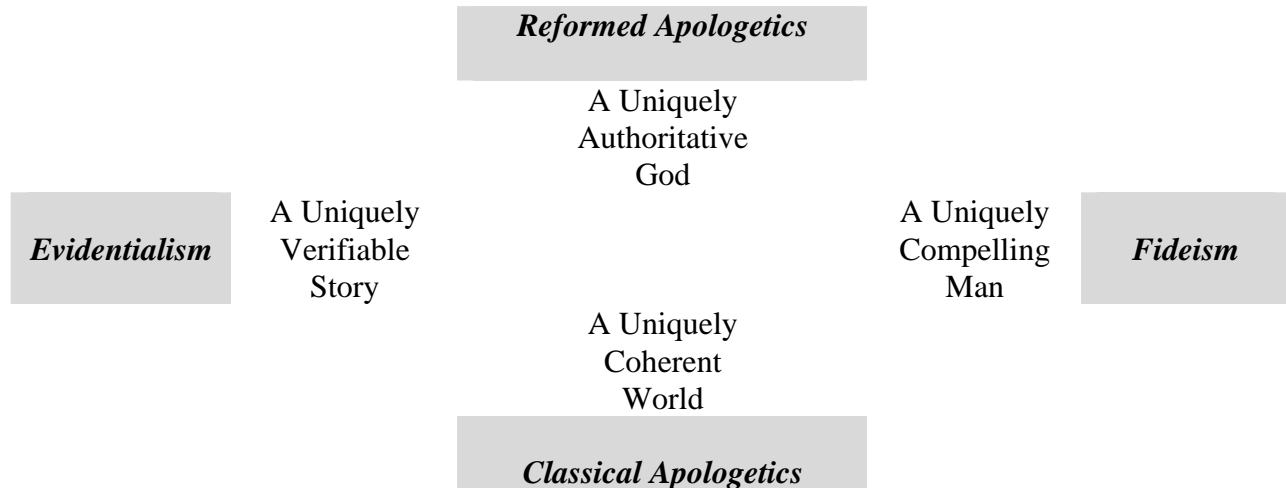
Both evidentialism and fideism emphasize Jesus Christ as the authority and Scripture primarily as presenting the story of Jesus Christ. (Obviously, all four views regard Jesus and Scripture as authoritative; we are talking about the primacy of their authority in relation to apologetic argument only.) The difference parallels that between classical and Reformed apologetics: the evidentialist recounts as factually verifiable the story of One whose supernatural life was immanent in history, while the fideist recounts as self-attesting the story of One whose supernatural life transcended history. Both perspectives are true. The fideist claim that Jesus is his own best witness is not contradicted or undermined by appealing to factual evidences as secondary witnesses to Jesus.

## **Myth, Truth, and Religion**

Two related questions have concerned us in discussing the different approaches to the plurality of religions. The first is the basis on which Christianity should be said to be unique; the second is the basis on which it should be distinguished from myths. The classical apologist argues that Christianity offers a *uniquely coherent worldview*; myths are the incoherent expressions of the human need for a coherent revelation from God. The evidentialist argues that it offers a *uniquely verifiable historical claim*, unlike the timeless, groundless stories in mythology. The Reformed apologist argues that it confronts us with a *uniquely authoritative God*; the gods of myths are either personal but merely superhuman, and therefore lacking absolute authority, or infinite but impersonal, and therefore lacking any authority. Only the God of the Bible is an absolute authority, and only such a God can be the source and ground of moral

absolutes. The fideist argues that Christianity confronts us with a *uniquely compelling Man*; the Jesus of the Gospels puts the heroes of myths and legends to shame by the sheer force of his real yet unparalleled humanity.

### Four Perspectives on the Uniqueness of Christianity



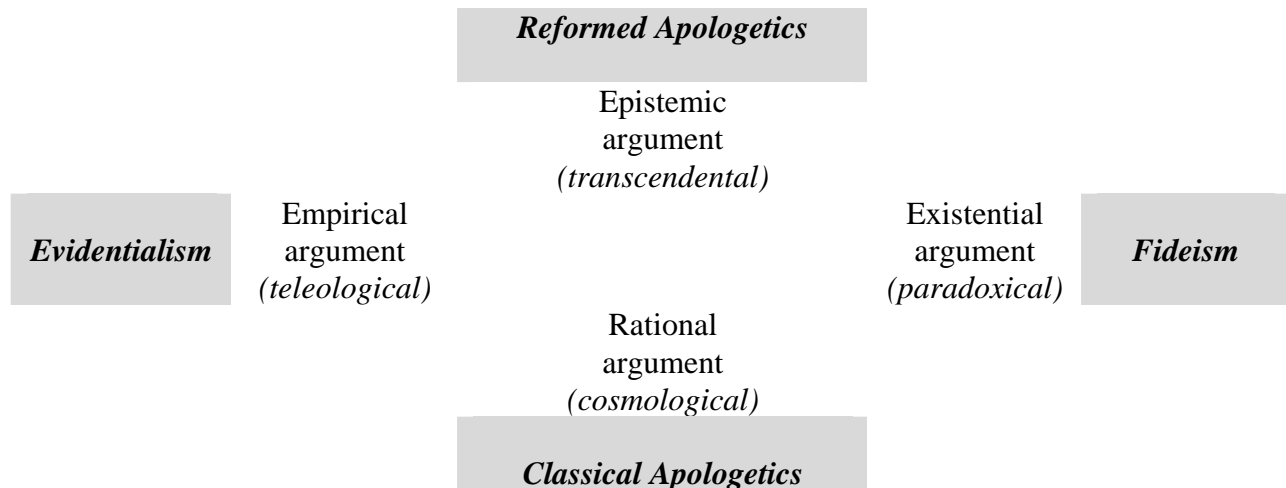
Here is one aspect of apologetics where the four approaches are most clearly compatible. Superficially, fideism seems to contradict the other three approaches by claiming that we should not defend Christianity as a religion but instead characterize it as a call to a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. In fact, the other three approaches seek to defend not the historical religion of Christianity, but the belief in the authoritative “call” found in Scripture. The different ways in which they tend to frame their defense are complementary, not contradictory.

## God Who Makes Himself Known

For many apologists, the dominant question in apologetics is how one should seek to persuade non-Christians to believe in God. And it is here that the four approaches often seem

furthest apart, though we think needlessly so. Classical and evidentialist apologists generally favor deductive and inductive proofs for God’s existence, while Reformed apologists and fideists generally reject such proofs. However, in their place the latter two use *indirect* arguments for the existence of God. Reformed apologists argue that belief in God is properly basic (Plantinga), or that God’s existence is as necessary a presupposition to make sense of the world as the most fundamental principles of logic (Van Til). Fideists argue that God can be known only in an existential or personal encounter in Jesus Christ, yet even they typically cannot resist offering an indirect argument for the reality of the God revealed in Christ. The very paradoxical nature of the God revealed in Jesus, the offense to our reason and sense of propriety that the Christian gospel evokes, is proof that it was not of human invention but of divine revelation.

#### Four Perspectives on Arguments for God’s Existence



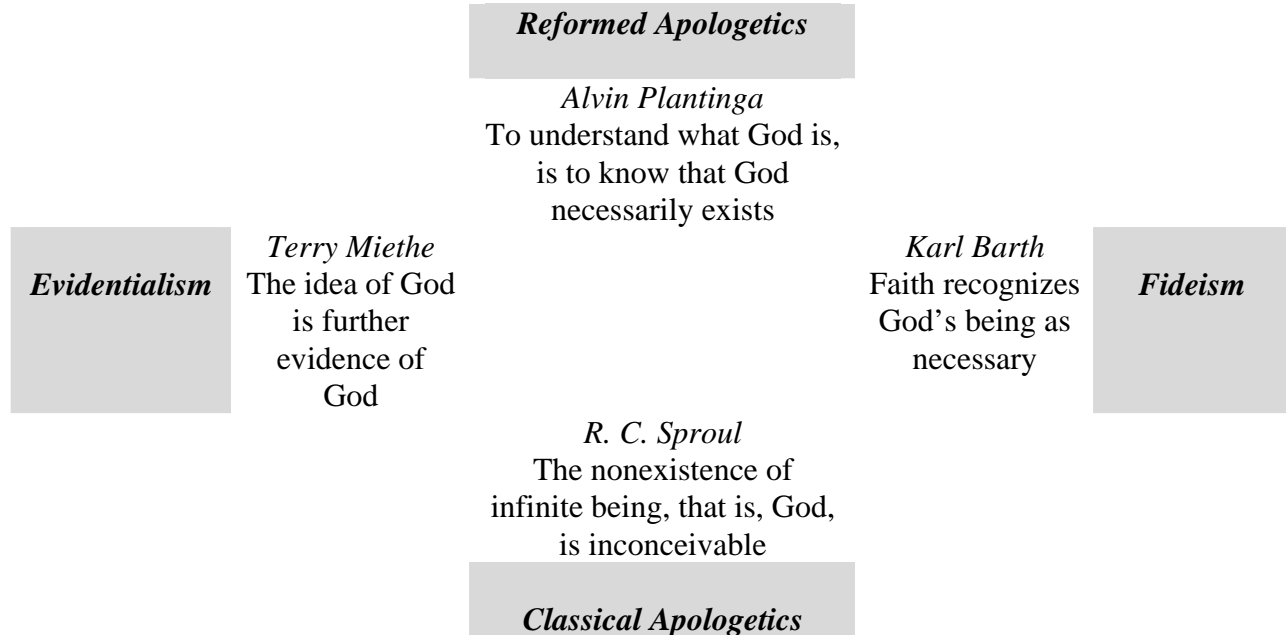
There is no reason why all these arguments might not be useful, either together or separately in different contexts. Fideists and Reformed apologists usually criticize the classical and evidential arguments because they cannot prove God; all they can prove is an infinite

Ground of Being or a finite Designer (or Designers). We believe such objections can be largely overcome by combining the arguments in a cumulative case, as most classical and evidentialist apologists today do. But in any case, the apologist need not and usually does not claim that any one of these arguments, or even all such traditional arguments combined, proves everything that needs to be known about God. The purpose of theistic proofs is more modest: to establish the reasonableness of belief in the kind of God spoken of in Scripture, so that the non-Christian will be convinced to take the miraculous and revelatory claims of the Bible more seriously.

Evidentialist arguments for God are also commonly criticized for concluding merely that God probably exists. Faith, it is pointed out, must believe that God *is*, not that he “probably” is (Hebrews 11:6). But this criticism again asks too much of the arguments. To assert that a specific argument shows that God probably exists is not to assert that God’s existence cannot be known as a certainty on some other basis. A person who concludes that God probably exists, based for example on the teleological or design argument, has not thereby arrived at faith—but no evidentialist would ever suggest that he had. But such a person is now confronted with the necessity of coming to a final conclusion and understanding about God. He now realizes that he must take seriously the possibility that God does exist and that he has revealed himself. The argument thus serves a valuable purpose, even though it does not yield the definitive certainty that is the property of faith.

Indeed, no argument can produce faith. This is just as true of the transcendental argument of Cornelius Van Til as it is of the design argument of William Paley or the cosmological argument of Norman Geisler. Even arguments that formally produce absolutely or deductively certain conclusions do not create or constitute faith.

### Four Perspectives on the Ontological Argument



Not only can different arguments be useful in persuading people to come to faith in God, but the same argument can be useful from different perspectives. We illustrate this with the ontological argument, which enjoyed something of a revival during the last third of the twentieth century. Surprisingly, it is possible to find advocates of all four approaches who find apologetic value in the ontological argument. According to R. C. Sproul and his co-authors in *Classical Apologetics*, it proves that the nonexistence of infinite being, or God, is inconceivable.<sup>1</sup> Terry Miethe, an evidentialist, has argued that the ontological proof is one of several that should be considered as evidence for God's existence.<sup>2</sup> Alvin Plantinga, the lead architect of the "new Reformed epistemology," has developed a very sophisticated restatement of the argument. His main contention seems to be that once a person understands the concept of God, implicit in that understanding is the logically certain existence of God. As a Reformed apologist, though, Plantinga recognizes that people generally do not come to belief in God via such an argument; he is therefore focusing on proving that God, if he exists, must be a necessary being.<sup>3</sup> Finally, Karl

Barth has argued that Anselm's ontological argument is at bottom an affirmation of "faith seeking understanding." The believer in God, reflecting on the nature of God, comes to understand that God cannot not exist.<sup>4</sup>

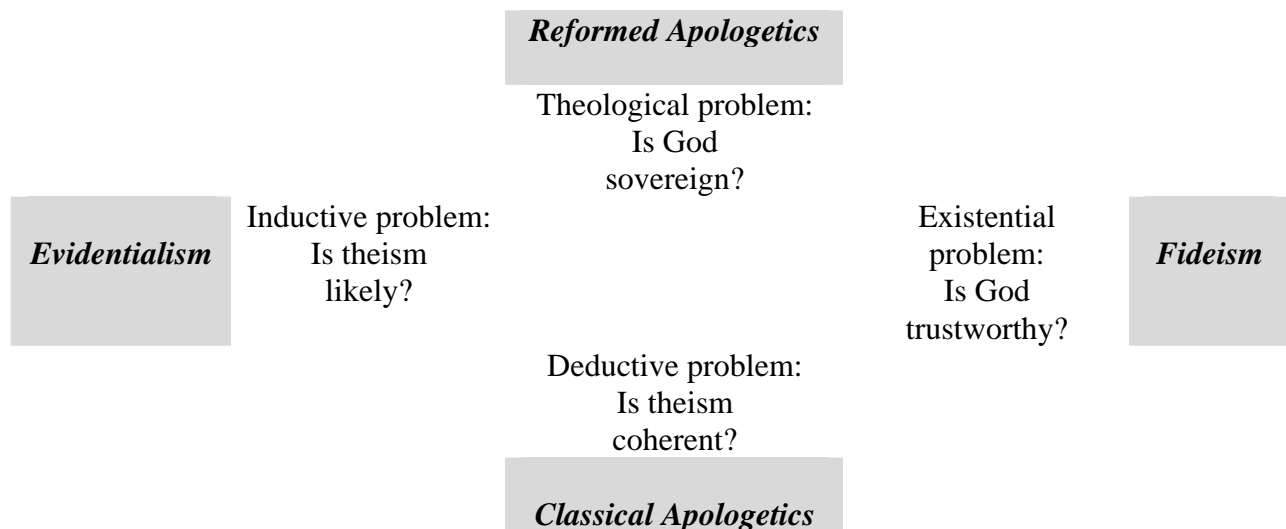
## Solutions to the Problems of Evil

The perspectival relationship among the four approaches is perhaps most easily seen in the "problem of evil" or, as we have seen, *problems* of evil, for there are several, not just one. Thus the integration of the four approaches here is essentially a matter of seeing them as contributing answers to different questions.

Classical apologetics focuses on resolving the *deductive* problem of evil: Is theism, which affirms both the existence of an all-loving, all-powerful God and the reality of evil, *coherent*? The classical model can include several explanations for a yes answer to this question, but they generally amount to this: the reality of evil does not contradict the existence of God if God has a good enough reason for allowing evil. Evidentialism focuses on answering the *inductive* problem of evil: Is theism, in view of the amount and kinds of evil that exist, *likely*? The evidentialist responds that evil does not make God's existence unlikely because it cannot counterbalance the significant evidence for God. Reformed apologetics (specifically presuppositionalism) focuses on the *theological* problem of evil that is particularly applicable to Reformed theology: If God is not to blame for evil, can he really be *sovereign*? Reformed theologians and apologists answer yes and typically argue that God's sovereign control over creation and history should not be construed as a mechanical or linear cause-and-effect determinism. Fideists focus on the *existential* or personal problem of evil: In light of the evils in the world God created, is God really *trustworthy*? They base their affirmative answer on God's

personal, sacrificial involvement in the consequences of evil through the suffering and death of his Son Jesus Christ.

### Four Perspectives on the Problem of Evil



As Steven Cowan has rightly pointed out, apologists need to “address all of these different aspects of the problem of evil.”<sup>5</sup> Historically, however, apologists who advocated one of the four basic approaches to apologetics have tended to focus only on the one corresponding question. (Evidentialists, perhaps more than other apologists, have often addressed two or more of these questions.) What we are recommending here is that apologists explicitly recognize the importance of all four questions and overtly address all of them using the insights of apologists of different approaches.<sup>6</sup>

## Miracles as Signs

The question that has dominated discussions about miracles in apologetics for the past century or longer is this: Are miracles serviceable as elements of an apologetic, or are they difficulties for which an apologetic is needed? The answer, we would suggest, is both. For those who believe in God, or at least are open to belief in God, a well-attested miracle can be the basis of a persuasive argument that God has acted and revealed himself in a special way. To those who do not believe in God and are resistant to the idea of a miracle-working God, miracle stories are a major type of stumbling block to faith.

#### Four Perspectives on Miracles



Classical apologists typically focus on showing that miracles in general are *possible*. Given that a Creator God exists, such a God could do miracles, and they would not contradict or violate natural law. Evidentialists typically focus on showing that specific miracles in light of the evidence are *probable*. They contend that well-documented miracles can count as evidence for a theistic worldview. Reformed apologists typically argue that the biblical miracles are *prophetical*. That is, miracles are part of God's authoritative, self-attesting revelation. (Reformed apologists tend to be more skeptical of modern miracles than most other apologists.) Fideists typically argue that miracles are *paradoxical*. They reveal a God who transcends the humanly

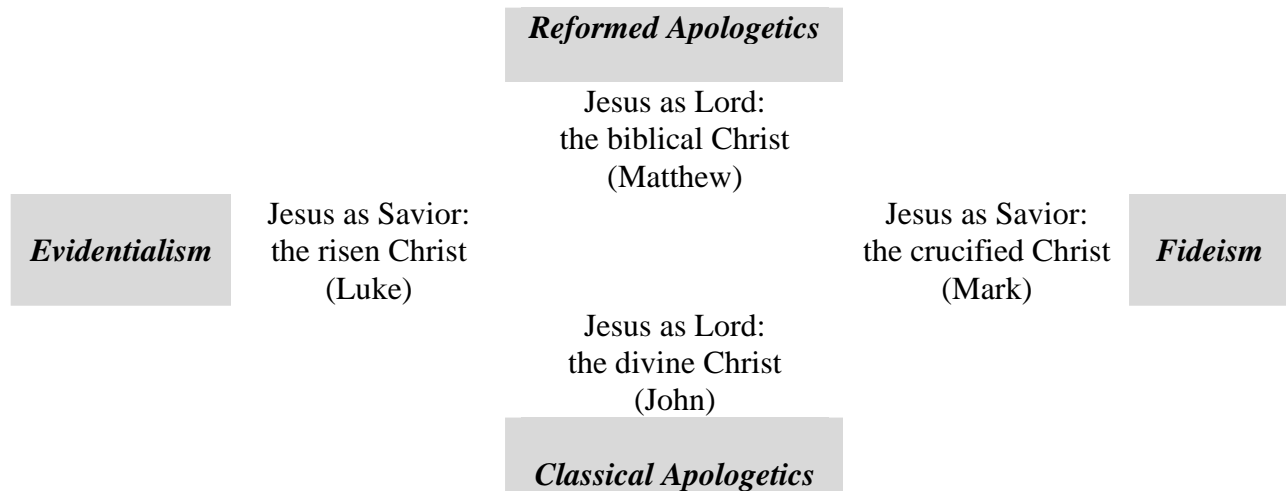
possible and who, while not violating natural law, contravenes our natural expectations. To those who by grace know God to be the infinite, personal God revealed in Jesus Christ, such paradoxical events will be just the sort of thing they would expect from God.

It is apparent that the four approaches differ on the relation of miracles to apologetics at least in part because they focus on different questions about miracles. To establish that miracles are possible, one must first establish that God exists. However, to show that a specific miracle most likely occurred, one need not establish that God exists, but only that God's existence is as likely as not. But it would be a mistake to think that every person who believes that miracles have occurred believes each miracle on the basis of an assessment of the evidence for that specific miracle. If a Christian is convinced that the Bible is God's unerring Word, he will believe the biblical accounts of Elijah's altar being consumed by fire (1 Kings 18) or of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11) simply because the Bible reports them. (It is unlikely that any empirical evidence could be marshaled to show that these miraculous events most likely occurred.) Yet the same Christian might express confidence in other biblical miracles, such as the resurrection of Jesus, on the basis of historical argument. Finally, the fideist's characterization of the miracles of Christ as paradoxical alerts us to the difference between showing that a miracle story is reasonable and showing that it will seem reasonable to the non-Christian. While the classical apologist rightly argues that if God exists we might expect him to do miracles, the fideist also is right to argue that if God does miracles they will likely not be what we expected.

## **Jesus: The Answer**

Christian apologetics in all four approaches is at heart about Christ; its goal is to present reasons why people should trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. An apologetic that is not in some way focused on Christ is therefore deficient. However, the four approaches focus on Christ in different and complementary ways. Evidentialism and fideism tend to emphasize the work of Jesus Christ as Savior, while classical and Reformed apologetics tend to emphasize the person of Jesus Christ as Lord.

### Four Perspectives on Jesus Christ and Apologetics



Remarkably, the four approaches emphasize perspectives on Jesus that correlate quite well with the different emphases of the four Gospels. Classical apologists argue that given the existence of God, Jesus Christ's claim to be God is extremely difficult to deny, and they naturally emphasize his more explicit claims to deity in the Gospel of John. Evidentialists argue that the evidence for Jesus' life, death, and resurrection provides compelling reasons to believe that he is the risen Savior. Most evidentialists appeal to Luke's explicit claim to be writing an historical account (Luke 1:1-4) and the emphasis in his Gospel and its sequel, the book of Acts, on the multiple witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Reformed apologists, specifically

presuppositionalists, argue that we should believe in Jesus Christ because he is revealed in the self-attesting Word of God in Scripture. They emphasize that Jesus' life, miracles, death, and resurrection did not occur in a vacuum, but were part of God's redemptive plan revealed prophetically in the Old Testament. The Gospel of Matthew, of course, is well known for the Old Testament quotations that punctuate its narrative and announce Jesus' fulfillment of messianic expectations. Finally, fideists argue that it is in the paradox of the powerful Messiah coming to serve, suffer, and die on the cross that Jesus reveals the love and mercy of God. This is indeed the focus of the Gospel of Mark: Jesus casts out demons, performs healings, speaks with authority, and yet in humility and seeming weakness allows himself to be crucified.

Just as the four Gospels present complementary portraits of Jesus Christ, so the four approaches emphasize complementary truths about Jesus that can be used to persuade people to believe. The complementary nature of these approaches is beautifully suggested by Jesus' discourse in John 5. Jesus' own witness to himself, while right and compelling, is not sufficient to establish the validity of his claim to be God's Son (verses 30-31). Jesus' works bear witness that his claim to be sent by the Father is true (verse 36). Of course, his works eventually included his death and resurrection. Ultimately, though, the final authoritative witness to Jesus is that of God the Father, given in Scripture (verses 37-47). The witness of mere men such as John the Baptist is not the basis on which Jesus' claim is validated, but it is nevertheless useful because it may help persuade some people (verses 33-35). The apologist's witness is like John the Baptist's: faith is not to be based on his arguments, but they may be helpful in pointing people to the truth about Jesus. Apologists are not the light, but they are privileged to be witnesses to the light (cf. John 1:8).

## For Further Study

Peterson, Michael, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, eds. *Philosophy of*

*Religion: Selected Readings*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Collection of essays and excerpts from Christian and non-Christian thinkers on theistic arguments, the problem of evil, miracles, and other subjects of apologetic interest.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. 3d ed.

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003. Textbook survey of the same

subjects covered in their *Readings*. Both books are especially strong in Christian

philosophy from classical and Reformed perspectives.

---

<sup>1</sup>Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 93-108.

<sup>2</sup>Terry L. Miethe and Gary R. Habermas, *Why Believe? God Exists! Rethinking the Case for God and Christianity* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1993), 65-71.

<sup>3</sup>See especially Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>Karl Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of His Theological Scheme*, trans. Ian W. Robertson, 2nd ed. (London: SCM; Richmond: John Knox, 1960).

<sup>5</sup>Cowan, review of *Faith Has Its Reasons* (1st ed.), in *Philosophia Christi* 6 (2004): 371.

<sup>6</sup>For a recent discussion focusing on two of the problems (the deductive and inductive problems of evil), see Daniel Howard-Snyder, “God, Evil, and Suffering,” in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Murray, 76-115.