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**R. C. SPROUL**



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R. C. SPROUL

*Does God Exist?*

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## Contents

<b>One</b>	The Case for God . . . . .	1
<b>Two</b>	Four Possibilities . . . . .	9
<b>Three</b>	The Illusion of Descartes . . . . .	15
<b>Four</b>	Self-Creation, Part 1 . . . . .	23
<b>Five</b>	Self-Creation, Part 2 . . . . .	29
<b>Six</b>	Self-Existence . . . . .	35
<b>Seven</b>	Necessary Being . . . . .	43
<b>Eight</b>	The God of the Bible vs. the God of Philosophy . . . . .	51
<b>Nine</b>	Kant's Moral Argument . . . . .	61
<b>Ten</b>	Vanity of Vanities . . . . .	71
<b>Eleven</b>	The Psychology of Atheism . . . . .	81



## Chapter One

# The Case for God

**I**mmanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was a watershed moment in the history of theoretical thought. The book gives a comprehensive critique of the traditional arguments for the existence of God. It forced the church to wrestle with some important questions. How do we now approach apologetics (the defense of the faith)? How can we legitimately make a case for God without falling into the trap of the problems Kant posed? Several different approaches arose in response.

One view, known as fideism, maintained that we cannot convincingly argue for the existence of God. Instead, belief in God's existence must be based on faith. Many theologians and

## Does God Exist?

Christians have adopted this viewpoint. Some even go so far as to say that people must simply take a leap of faith into the darkness and hope that someone out there will catch them.

There are flaws with this approach. Even though faith is central to biblical Christianity, there is a difference between faith and foolishness. Yet people often assert that the way of the Christian world is the way of faith to the exclusion of the way of reason. For example, the ancient church father Tertullian asked, “What does Jerusalem have to do with Athens?” He also said, “I believe Christianity because it is absurd.” If by saying this Tertullian meant that Christianity is absurd from the world’s perspective, that would be one thing. But if he meant that it’s objectively absurd, that would be a serious slander against the character of God and the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of truth.

Another approach, called evidentialism, asserts that the way to defend the Christian faith is through appeals to history. Many apologists take this approach, acknowledging that while arguments from the field of history can never give absolute proof, they do offer a high degree of probability. That high degree of probability results in what is called moral certainty. While these arguments from biblical history may not give the same formal certainty that is found in

logical deduction, they certainly are powerful enough that they leave people without any moral escape hatches.

In our American judicial system, when people are charged with serious crimes, the burden of proof rests on the prosecution. They must prove that the person is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Similarly, evidentialists attempt to show that the evidence of history so communicates and proves the existence of God that it is beyond a reasonable doubt. In fact, the evidence is so overwhelming that only a fool would deny their conclusion.

The problem with this approach is that even in the face of overwhelming probability, the sinner still has a tiny escape hatch to say: “You didn’t prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Maybe it’s not reasonable for me to doubt it, but you haven’t proven your case conclusively.” A philosopher named Gotthold Ephraim Lessing posed the metaphor of the great ditch that divides this world from the world of God. He said that the contingent things of events in history can never prove eternal things.

It is often thought that there are only two kinds of apologists—evidentialists (whom we have already discussed) and presuppositionalists (whom we will examine in a moment). Yet there is another school of thought called

the classical school of apologetics. The difference between the classical school and the evidentialist school is this: evidentialists argue that the evidence drawn from history and elsewhere gives a high degree of probability for the existence of God, whereas classicists argue that proof for the existence of God is conclusive and compelling. It is actual proof that leaves people without any excuses whatsoever.

In contrast to evidentialism and classicism, the approach that has become the overwhelming majority view within Reformed theology is known as presuppositional apologetics. The most popular version was developed by Cornelius Van Til, who published much in this field and was a genuine titan of the Christian faith.

Van Til wrote in the English language but, since he was from the Netherlands and English was not his native tongue, he sometimes wrote in a style that is difficult to follow. Consequently, not only do his critics differ among themselves as to what he actually said, but some of his most noteworthy students differ in how they interpret him.

The presuppositional view says this: In order to arrive at the conclusion that God exists and to prove His existence, one must start with the primary premise of the existence of God. In other words, unless the existence of God is

presupposed, one can never reach the conclusion that He exists. The objection immediately arises that this procedure involves the classic logical fallacy called *petitio principii*, the fallacy of circular reasoning, in which the conclusion appears in the premises. This is the chief objection raised against presuppositional apologetics.

Van Til, aware that such a charge would be made, defended against it by saying that all reasoning moves in a circular fashion, insofar as its starting point, middle ground, and conclusions are all involved with one another. If one starts with a rational premise and reasons consistently in a rational way, his conclusion will be of a rational sort. And so, with that definition, Van Til justified his use of circular reasoning, arguing that it was no different from any of the other approaches, because all reasoning is circular in that sense. However, this justification for circular reasoning contains two deadly fallacies.

The first fallacy is the fallacy of circular reasoning, which in classic categories of logic invalidates an argument. The justification for using circular reasoning introduces the second fallacy, the fallacy of equivocation, in which a term changes its meaning in the middle of the argument. Van Til justified circular reasoning by saying that all reasoning

## Does God Exist?

is circular (in the sense that its starting point and conclusion are of a similar sort), but that is not what is meant by the term *circular reasoning*. A rational argument, if it is to be rational, must be consistently rational throughout. Why call that a circle when in fact it is linear?

Granted, presuppositions are involved in rational argumentation: the presupposition of reason, the presupposition of the law of noncontradiction, the presupposition of causality, the presupposition of the basic reliability of sense perception, and the presupposition of the analogical use of language. Those who defend Van Til argue that he was getting at something deeper than a superficial exercise in circular reasoning. Instead, they claim, he was saying that even assuming rationality necessarily involves presupposing the existence of God, because without God, there is no foundation for rational argumentation. So, even though a person may not want to admit it, advocating for reason assumes the ground of that reason, which is God Himself.

Classicists certainly agree that if rationality is to be meaningful, and if the presuppositions of epistemology are sound, then they scream for the existence of God. But that is exactly what classical apologetics is trying to prove. We must show people that if they want to be rational, they

must affirm the existence of God, because the very rationality that they presuppose demands the existence of God.

The biggest objection to presuppositionalism, beside these logical errors, is that no one starts with God except God. One cannot start in his mind with God and the knowledge of God unless he is God. Human beings start with self-consciousness and then move from there to the existence of God. They do not start with God-consciousness and move to the existence of the self. By necessity, human beings thinking with human minds must start where they are.

The theologian Augustine of Hippo said that with self-consciousness always immediately comes an awareness of finitude—the moment that we are aware of ourselves as selves, we know that we are not God. The idea of autonomy, in which a person is a law unto himself, is not contained in the idea of self-consciousness. If it were, it would indeed be sinful to start at that point. But what we are actually saying is this: beginning with self-consciousness is a given to creatureliness. It's the only place any of us can start in our thinking. We cannot start with the thoughts of others or the thoughts of God. The only place we can start is our own self-awareness, and from there we move on and soon discover that we are not autonomous at all.

## Does God Exist?

If we begin with self-consciousness and reason correctly, far from ending in autonomy, we will by necessity end up affirming the existence of God. The fear among presuppositionalists is that in arguing rationally and empirically, they give too much away to the pagan world. And the fear of the classicists toward the presuppositionalists is precisely the same thing: they give too much away. They give the pagan an excuse for not believing in the existence of God because the pagan can see that their approach violates principles of rationality.

Yet, regardless of the differing views on apologetics within Reformed theology, we all agree that the reality of the existence of God is the single most important premise in the building of one's life and worldview. We know that according to Romans 1, the first lie that the pagan embraces is the denial of the eternal power and deity of God. As a result, his mind becomes darkened, and the more brilliant he is, the further away he moves from that first awareness of God that he receives in nature.

Therefore, we all agree in the supreme importance of establishing early on in our apologetics the existence of God. In the next chapter, we'll begin to demonstrate how classical apologetics constructs its case for the existence of God.

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# Can we prove the existence of God?

Many people believe in God, but is it possible to prove that He exists? Or must we simply take a leap of faith?

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul shows that we don't have to give up our intellect in order to believe. In fact, logic and reason clearly demonstrate that God exists, and no one has an excuse for their unbelief. Dr. Sproul rebuts common arguments from atheists, exposing the inconsistency and illogical nature of denying the existence of God.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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