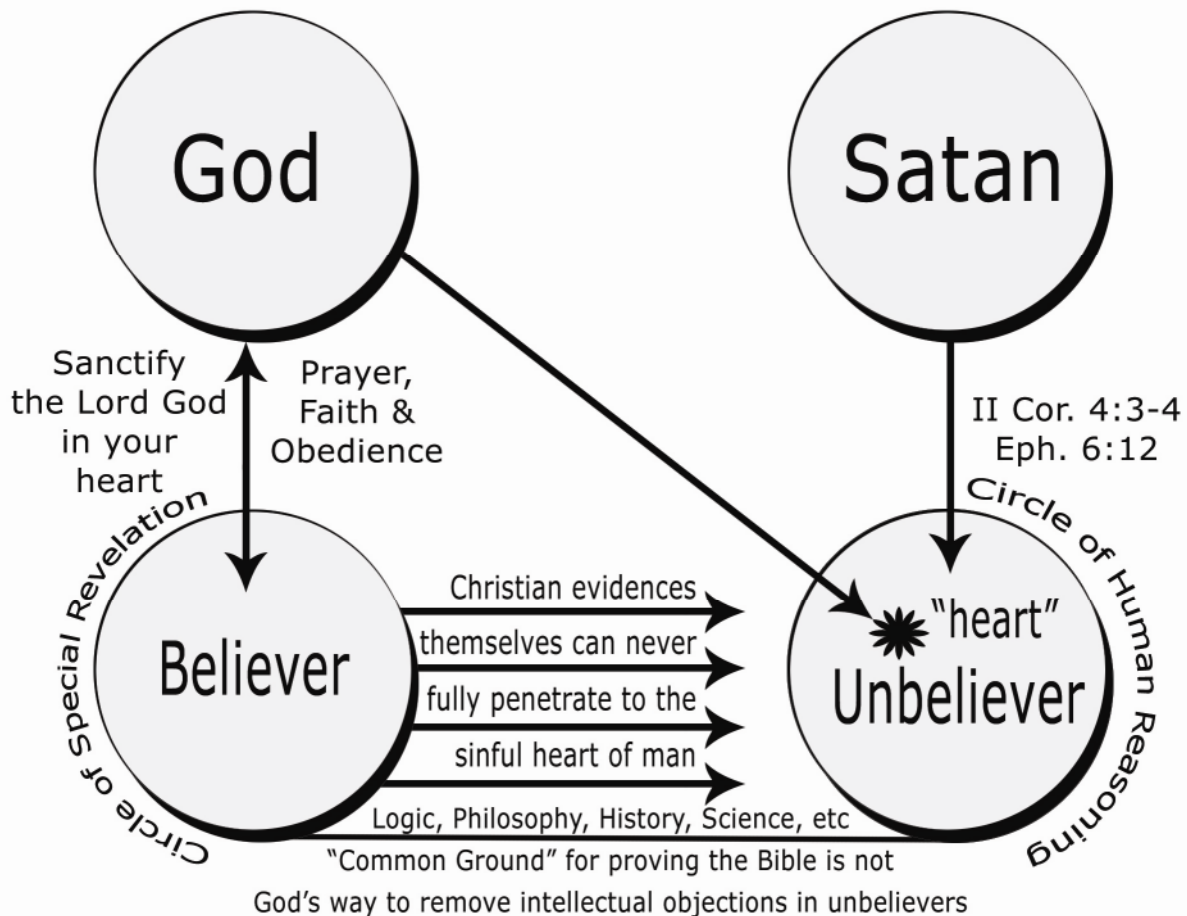


## THE VALUE AND LIMITATIONS OF EVIDENCES AND APOLOGETICS



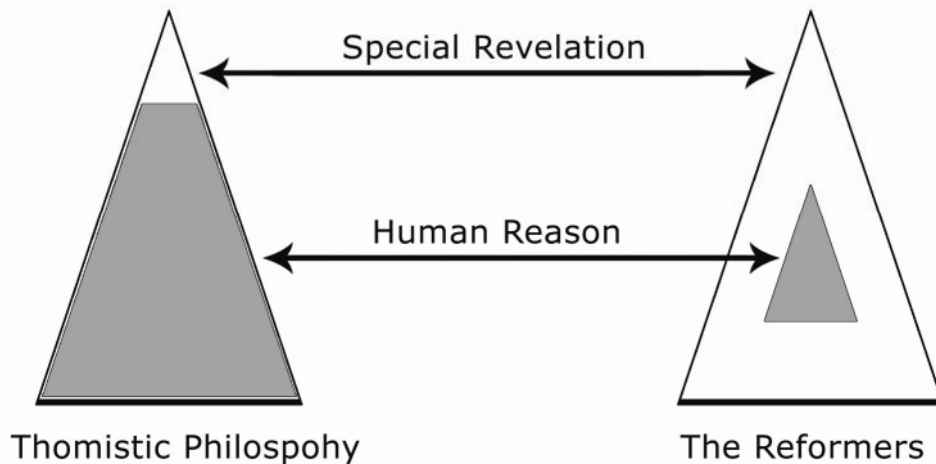
### The Problem Stated

In seeking to fulfill the Great Commission by witnessing to lost men, Christians sometimes abandon their God-given offensive weapons (the consistent godly life persistent prayer, and the true preaching of God's Word) in favor of "proving" God and the Bible by means of logic, philosophy, history, archaeology, and science. But however skillfully such arguments are presented; they fail to penetrate the heart of the unbeliever. He is shielded by a built-in wall of defense against God's truth and God's claims upon him. No matter how unskilled or inexperienced in debate and argumentation he may be, he will successfully avoid the full implication of your "proofs," even though he may politely admit the truth of what you say. Unbelievers who understand some of the issues involved in debating the claims and merits of Christianity will appeal either to the "rational" or to the "irrational" approach to reality in order to escape the necessity of full and final commitment and surrender to Jesus Christ as Lord. When the great evidences for the supernatural character of Christianity are clearly presented (e.g., fulfilled prophecy, the organic unity of the Bible, the resurrection of Christ, the conversion of the Apostle Paul), the unbeliever will insist that they would be capable of rational explanation if all the facts were known, or he will maintain that the universe is basically irrational and meaningless anyway, and since many inexplicable things happen in such a universe, the so-called "miracles" of the Christian religion can have no relevance for a person living in the 20th century, even if they did occur!

### The Apologetics of St. Thomas

Especially since the time of St. Thomas Aquinas (13th cent. A.D.), philosophers and theologians have struggled to "prove" the existence and character of God through human reasoning. St. Thomas (and his follower, who are known as "Thomists") attempted to construct a pyramid of logic and philosophy that would provide a solid foundation for the Christian religion. He appealed to the pagan Aristotle for the correct approach to nature. He thought that most truths of Christianity could thus be established by an

appeal to the "facts" of the universe and of human experience, and that special revelation was only the capstone to this magnificent pyramid. But such an approach reveals a very shallow concept of human sin and depravity. The Bible everywhere gives a negative answer to Zophar's question: "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?" (Job 11:7). In other words, unless one is already a Christian (like St. Thomas), the "proofs" for God's existence fail to carry real conviction. The cosmological argument, for example, can only be used to prove that the universe was brought into existence by a Being greater than the universe itself, but not that this Being is the infinite, eternal, righteous, omnipotent, omniscient, triune God of the Bible. An eternal finite god, or an infinite regression of increasingly greater gods is poor consolation for such tremendous philosophical efforts! The fact of the matter is that unless God reveals Himself to men, they cannot and will not find Him. And it is only in the light of Biblical revelation that we can correctly understand who God is, what we are, how the world began, where it is going, how we can please God, and what the universe (seen and unseen) is really like. "In thy light shall we see light" (Psalm 36:9). The Protestant Reformation clearly saw this truth, as it swept away the subtleties and futilities of Thomistic philosophy.



Man's Basic Problem

Actually, God never intended that Christians should win the lost by logical arguments, or even remove their intellectual stumbling blocks so that the Word of God might penetrate their hearts. In the first place, the vast majority of Christians are incapable of meeting the unbeliever "on his own level" in intellectual debate, and thus would never be able to present Christ to men whose philosophical and scientific objections to Christianity and the Bible were not answered first. "For behold your calling, brethren, that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called" (I Cor. 1:26). In the second place, the basic problem of the unbeliever is not intellectual anyway. His basic problem is moral and spiritual. The Bible says that all unbelievers (including "honest doubters") are enemies of God, and are guilty of deliberately distorting all of reality to fit into their own frame of reference because they do not want to surrender to God. "The wicked, in the pride of his countenance, saith, He will not require it. All his thoughts are, There is no God." (Psalm 10:4). "Jehovah looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, that did seek after God. They are all gone aside; they are together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Psalm 14:2-3). "The mind of the flesh is enmity against God for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be" (Rom. 8:6). "While we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10).

Unfathomable Mysteries

Thus, it is utterly impossible to present true Christianity to the unbeliever in such a way as to make it appear logical and pleasing to him. To the extent that we attempt to do this, to that same extent are we tempted to modify the Gospel message (especially in such areas as Biblical inspiration, supernatural creation, genuine miracles, human depravity, salvation by grace, and separation from the world) and thus

deny and distort it. God is certainly not honored by such methods, the unbeliever is not helped, and the Christian must some day answer to God for perverting His truth. A man who "accepts Christianity" only because it has been made to fit into his presuppositions and his self-made frame of reference, will pervert or abandon Christianity when offenses or testings come. "My speech and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (I Cor. 2:5). God does not need to revise or modify His Word in order to win 20th-century "scholars" to Himself; for God's Word is "forever settled in the heavens" (Psalm 119:89), and "till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished" (Matt. 5:18). Are we thereby asserting that the Word of God and Christianity are fundamentally illogical and unreasonable? This seems to be the tendency in existential and New-Orthodox circles. The answer to this question must be no, for one of the basic doctrines of Scripture is that the three persons of the Triune God know and understand thoroughly each other and every aspect of created reality (Matt. 11:27, John 5:20, I Cor. 2:10, Heb. 4:13). I Corinthians 1:18 does not assert that the "word of the cross" is "foolishness" in itself, but that it appears to be foolish "to them that perish." But having stated this point, we must hasten to add that the Bible and Christianity contain mysteries that no Christian can fathom. Paul cried out: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out" (Rom. 11:33). "For now we see in a mirror, darkly (ASV margin: "in a riddle") . . . now I know in part" (I Cor. 13:12). If this be so, then how much less can we expect an unregenerate man to evaluate properly the logical coherence and factuality of Christianity and the Bible? And in the light of this, how wide of the mark is the following analysis of how a "rational man" may determine the truth of Christianity;

"Granted that we need revelation from God to learn how he will dispose of us at the end of our lives, are there not many revelations which vie for our approval? How shall we make a selection, when we are not God? We can answer this in a sentence: Accept that revelation which, when examined, yields a system of thought which is horizontally self-consistent and which vertically fits the faces of history. When viewing the Bible, the Christian says, 'I see a series of data in the Bible, If I accept the system as it is outlined, I can make a lot of problems easy.' Bring on your revelation! Let them make peace with the law of contradiction and the facts of history, and they will deserve a rational man's assent. A careful examination of the Bible reveals that it passes these stringent examinations summa cum laude." (Edward J. Carnell, An Introduction to Christian Apologetics, Wm. B Eerdmans Pub Co., 1950, p. 178),

The fact remains, therefore, that the "rational man" will not surrender to the one true God and accept the absolute authority and inerrancy of God's written revelation because it "makes peace: with the law of contradiction and the facts of history" because "no man can say, Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit" (I Cor., 12:3) and because "the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged" (I Cor 2:14).

### The Biblical Method

The Biblical method of winning men (including "intellectuals" and "honest doubters") is to present the Gospel prayerfully and from the context of a godly life. Only the "living and powerful" Word of God can puncture the unbeliever's shield of defense and penetrate into his heart (Heb. 4:12), and only God may receive the glory for the conversion of sinful men. Once converted by God's Holy Spirit, a man will see his intellectual problems in a new and proper perspective (even if he cannot completely solve them) For example, when Saul was converted, he immediately said to the risen Christ: "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10). When his spiritual blindness was thus removed, "straightway in the synagogues he proclaimed Jesus, that he is the Son of God" (.Acts 9:20), and he "was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision" (Acts 26:19), though it must have required months, if not years, for him to re-think everything that he had learned in the light of this overwhelming new truth. The Gospel testimony that God used to speak to Saul's heart was Stephen's sermon, sealed with his own blood (Acts 7:58, 8:1). Study other examples in Acts of authoritative Gospel preaching, resulting in conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit, and genuine conversion (2:36-38, 8:35; 10:42-48; 16:31). Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, urging them to turn from worldly wisdom and from an unwarranted glorying in the gift of tongues, and to give

themselves to the clear proclamation of God's Word (prophesying). "But if all prophesy, and there come in one unbelieving or unlearned, he is reprov'd by all, he is judg'd by all; the secrets of his heart, are made manifest; and so he will fall down on his face and worship God, declaring that God is among you indeed" (I Cor. 14:24-25) To be sure, many have turned to I Peter 3:15 to support the notion that we are frequently obliged to "reason men-into the Kingdom" or at least to "remove their major intellectual objections in order that they might be ready to hear the Gospel." But nothing could be farther from the mind of Apostle Peter (who himself was "unlearned and Ignorant" - Acts 4:13 - from a purely academic standpoint, and was therefore presumably incapable of deep philosophical disputation) when he told Christians to be "ready to give answer to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you." The context makes it clear that Christians who suffer persecution for their godly lives and testimonies will sometimes be questioned by pagan neighbors concerning their "unnatural" behavior under such adverse conditions. If this happens, in the providence of God, they are to "give answer" with meekness and fear (prayerfully trusting God to honor His Word in the sense of giving a clear testimony to God's plan of salvation and of Christ's power to save. This, we believe, is the only true, God-honoring, and effective for of Christian "apologetics" (the Greek word for "answer" in this verse is apologian)

### Reasoning in a Circle

But if the Christian constantly appeals to his Bible in order to vindicate and 'prove' the Bible, is he not guilty of reasoning in a circle? If the unbeliever refuses to accept the Bible as divinely inspired, should not the Christian attempt first to prove the truth of the Bible by appealing to the facts of logic, history, archaeology, science, etc.? The answer to these questions is no. If Christianity is merely a circle of truth among other circles it is definitely a false circle, for the Scriptures claim to be God's Word, eternal, all-inclusive, unique, final, and absolutely authoritative. When the Christian appeals to God's Word he is appealing to the only circle of truth there is-concerning God and spiritual realities - - and this circle includes the entire scope of reality, visible and invisible, including the unbeliever himself! To abandon Scripture in order to establish "common ground" with the unbeliever is thus to abandon TRUTH in order to grope together in the darkness that characterizes this world-system apart from God. TRUTH happens to be self-authenticating and self-vindicating, like lights. When seeking to rescue a man lost in the deep recesses of a dark cave, it is best to bring along a powerful flashlight. And if, by chance, he refuses to believe that you possess such a flashlight and that you can lead the way out of the cave, it is best not to argue about the dimensions, price, make, and past qualities of the flashlight. Since he still has the capacity for physical sight, the best answer to his question is to invite him to look at the light as you turn it on! Similarly, if a man asks you to prove the Bible, simply invite him to read it for himself or to listen to it, and pray that God will open the eyes of his spiritual understanding (II Cor. 4: 6; II Tim. 2:23-26). If this does not prove effective, then it is absolutely certain that the so-called 'proofs' for God and the Bible will likewise prove ineffective. What more in the way of 'Christian evidences' could Judas Iscariot have asked for? "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, if one rise from the dead" (Luke 16:17).

### What Rights Does the Sinner Have?

But with so many false religions, philosophies, and cults in the world today, how can a man be sure that the Bible and Christianity are true? Is it not his right and even his responsibility, to investigate carefully the validity of Christianity in- comparison with other possible alternatives before making a final decision? A-gain, the answer is no. Christianity is not just £ way of life among several, and the Lord Jesus Christ is not just a savior among various other ones in the world. Furthermore, man is not a neutral, unbiased observer in spiritual matters, capable of sitting in judgment as one religion after another passes before him in review, waiting to find one that is logically coherent, historically and scientifically factual, and personally satisfying, before adopting it as his own! Quite to the contrary, men are not neutral observers but active enemies of the one true God of Scripture, in whose image they have been created, and in whom they live, move, and have their being (Acts 17:28), It is true that this image of God in man has been marred through the Fall, but it is still intact (I Cor. 11:7, James 3:9), and explains the infinite gulf that separates man (even in his sin) from the beast. Because man bears God's image, he basically knows who the true God is! That is why he runs away from God and His Word, and hides his face from Him (Isa, 53:3). That is why he hinders or suppresses the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18) and "hateth the light, and cometh not to the light" (John 3:20). Sinful men cannot innocently claim that God

is an unknown entity to them, for the Lord Jesus Christ is "the true light" "which lighteth every man" (John 1:9) and "because that, knowing God, they glorified him not as God, neither gave thanks; but became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Therefore, from the Biblical standpoint, sinful men have no right to demand "proper credentials" when the Creator says to them: repent, believe the Gospel, and obey Me —NOW! When the Holy Spirit says to the human heart, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," it is spiritual suicide to hesitate, procrastinate, investigate, or debate. "Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (II Cor. 6:2). "But now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent" (Acts 17:30). If a sinner did have any "intellectual rights" with respect to Christ and the Bible, he would simply be a credulous fool to accept Christ and the Bible without adequate "proofs". As a matter of fact, he would have to examine carefully all the facts and every possible alternative before accepting Christianity, and he would die long before he could arrive at the place where he could make a decision on this basis. Such an approach to Christian Evidences and Apologetics is utterly ridiculous, to say nothing of being unBiblical. And to give an unbeliever the impression that he has a right to investigate all the problems before he repents of his sin and turns to Christ for forgiveness is to set him up on a pedestal of intellectual and spiritual pride from which he will never descend. "Wilt thou yet say before him that slayeth thee, I am God? but thou art man, and not God, in the hand of him that woundeth thee" (Ezek. 28:9). The so-called intellectual excuses of sinners will vanish "in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men, according to my gospel, by Jesus Christ" (Rom. 2:16), "that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may be brought under the judgment of God" (Rom. 3:19). Consequently, the Christian who will be most effectively used by God in winning others to Christ is not the one who knows most about philosophy, history, archaeology, and science, but the one who knows most about God's Word and who humbly seeks God's help in obeying it. In other words, the best Christian apologist is the best Christian theologian, who is skilful in the Word of righteousness (Heb. 5:13), a workman that does not need to be ashamed, because he is able to handle the Word of truth (II Tim. 2:15), one who is "mighty in the Scriptures" and thus able to "powerfully confute" the unbeliever (Acts 18:24-28).

#### Proof Texts for Rationalistic Apologetics

There are several passages of Scripture which frequently find their way into apologetic literature as "proof texts" for the rationalistic approach: (1) In I John 4:1, the command is given, "believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world." Does this mean that the unbeliever is to test or prove Christianity to find out whether it is of God before accepting it? No, because the command is issued to Christians ("Beloved, believe not every spirit. . .") who have the Word of God already as their absolute standard or measuring-stick of religious truth! (2) Romans 1:20 informs us that men are without excuse because "the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity." Does this mean that men have sufficient intelligence and powers of discernment to arrive at a full knowledge of the Triune God through natural theology alone? Again, the answer is no, because the passage goes on to point out that men are sinners who willfully pervert what knowledge of God they do have by virtue of special creation in His image, so that they "became vain in their reasonings, and their senseless heart was darkened" and "they became fools" (vss. 21-22). Thus, natural theology, or the revelation of God in nature fails to carry its full message to the human heart for the reason that men have willfully perverted and suppressed its message and do not want to pay heed to it! It must be added, however, that the witness of nature was never intended by God to be a substitute for special revelation, nor was it ever intended to have the power in itself of leading men to a saving knowledge of God, even if men were inclined to pay heed to its message. Its sole function is to remind men of what they already know about God and to activate their consciences with respect to their spiritual responsibility. (3) Acts 17:16-34 is sometimes cited as an example of rationalistic apologetics, as the Apostle Paul spoke on Mars Hill (the Areopagus) to the Greek philosophers and quoted two of their poets (Epimenides of Crete in 28a and Aratus of Cilicia in 28b) approvingly while avoiding any direct reference to the Scriptures. This sermon might well be cited as an example of how to be "wise as serpents" (Matt. 10:16) or how to become "as without law" (I Cor. 9:21), but it certainly cannot be cited as an example of how to win "intellectuals" to Christ by proving the existence of God or the truth of Christianity! Paul simply sets forth (vs. 23) the reality and claims of the true God (vss. 24-28), insists on this basis that "we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man" (vs. 29), and concludes with authoritative pronouncements on the need of immediate repentance (vs. 30), and the certainty of the bodily resurrection of Christ and of the coming judgment (vs. 31). The Spirit of

God used this sermon (which is only outlined here by Luke) for the salvation of "certain men. . .and a woman" (vs. 34), who "clave unto him, and believed," while all the rest of the philosophers mocked and procrastinated because to their minds his message was either unreasonable or irrelevant. The only type of "common ground" Paul used in order to reach these people was the common ground of speaking clearly in their own Greek tongue, of showing gracious, loving concern for their spiritual need, and of alluding wherever possible to their own Greek writings to illustrate points of agreement in the realm of natural theology. Obviously, these philosophers had never heard of Moses or the prophets, and they were not familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures. But while Paul did not quote directly from the Bible to support his assertions, he was true to the message of the Bible throughout! And it is the message of God's Word, rather than chapter and verse references, as such, which God uses to win men to Himself (remembering, of course, that a true and accurate message must in turn depend upon a true, accurate, and thus verbally inspired revelation, i.e., the Bible).

### The Value of Christian Evidences

In conclusion, what is the value of Christian Evidences in reaching men for Christ? If it is used to prove the truth of Christianity, it is not only without value, but it is also positively dangerous. As Christians, we must not give men the impression that they may be saved by any other means or method than the God-given method of faith in Christ. To give men any other impression is to side-track them from the only God-appointed way to heaven. Observe, for example, how graciously, and yet how persistently, our Lord kept the Samaritan woman to the main point at issue, refusing to enter into a lengthy discussion of the relative merits of worshipping God at Jerusalem or at Mount Gerizim (John 4:20-26). Granting, then, that Christian Evidences may not be properly used to bridge the gulf that separates the sinful mind of man from his God, does it not have great value in confirming and strengthening the faith of those who have already accepted Christ? Once again, we must give a negative answer. Having been saved through faith, we must also grow into spiritual maturity by faith, rather than by evidences, proofs, and scientific confirmations of the truth of the Bible. The case of the Galatians was quite similar to this, in that they looked elsewhere than to the faith-way in order to attain spiritual perfection: "Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). We are not saying that archaeological discoveries which confirm the historicity of certain statements in the Bible are not to be welcomed by Christians, or that they have no value at all. But such confirmations of Scripture must not be the foundation of our confidence in the infallibility of God's Word, nor may we use them to bring others to the possession of such confidence. Archaeology is very helpful in providing historical, cultural, and linguistic background light for the interpretation of some portions of the Bible; but spiritual maturity for the child of God can be brought about only through prayerful study of the Word and continual submission to God's revealed will (II Tim. 3:16-17). The kind of faith the Holy Spirit gives to God's people (if they be willing to receive it) is the kind that does not stagger or fail when the "evidences" are missing or when the "facts" seem to contradict. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29). May this be our spiritual goal as Christians, and the goal towards which we desire to lead others.

Suggestions for further study:

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Horne, Charles M., *A Biblical Apologetic Methodology* (Unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1963).

Jaarsma, Cornelius, Review of E. J. Carnell, *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, in the *Westminster Theological Journal* (May, 1953), pp. 183-185.

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Van Til, Cornelius, *The Defense of the Faith* (Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1955), pp. 313-56.

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