

I Can Lie to Myself: Self-Deception and Apologetics (Part 1)

By W.L. Bredehof

I first developed an interest in apologetics (the defense of the faith) while a university student in Edmonton some 15 years ago. I had spent most of my primary and secondary education in a Christian school. I never heard the Christian faith being challenged in any meaningful way. When I began attending the University of Alberta, that all changed. Suddenly I was confronted with difficult questions about what I believed, about what the Bible says, and about the Christian worldview. Providentially, in my second year of university I came across a book by Dr. Cornelius VanTil entitled *the Defense of the Faith*. This book literally changed everything for me. It remains an excellent overview of the Biblical, Christian faith (the Reformed faith) and how it shapes our approach to defending the faith. After reading VanTil, I also came to study briefly with a former student and protégé of VanTil, Dr. Greg Bahnsen. Equipped with the tools provided from the Scriptures by men like VanTil and Bahnsen, I became much more confident in my interactions with students and professors in the university setting. Later on, as I worked in evangelistic contexts before, during and after my missionary service, I would also be able to use what I'd learned. These days I find myself using what I know about apologetics mostly to answer the difficult questions of my children, especially my nine year old daughter: "But Dad, how do you know the Christian faith is true? How do you know the Bible is true?"

Those are the sorts of questions that apologetics equips us to answer. We're sometimes driven to the subject (as I was) by practical necessity. But there is also a Biblical command with regards to apologetics. In 1 Peter 3:15, we read, "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have." We could also translate that more literally, "Always be prepared to do apologetics..." Scripture is telling us to always be prepared to give a reasoned defense of our faith. Note first that this command is not something just for ministers and missionaries, but for all believers. Further, note what it says at the beginning of this verse about Christ as Lord. As we look to the subject of apologetics, Christ's Lordship has to be at the front of our minds. Concretely, that means that the Bible, Christ's Word, is what determines our apologetics. As we prepare to pull down strongholds and cast down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, we have to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:5. That happens through the Word.

The principle of *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone), is what sets Reformed apologetics apart from the other varieties out there. Non-Reformed schools of apologetics begin someplace else, typically with man and his natural reason. But when we come to apologetics as Reformed believers, we take our starting place with Scripture, just as we do with everything else.

As we do that, we'll find that there are certain key concepts from the Scriptures that shape our approach to defending our faith to unbelievers. In these two articles, I want to explore one of those key concepts -- in fact, after the priority we give to the Bible, this is

one of the most crucial elements of Reformed apologetics. If you don't have this straight, you will not have a distinctively Reformed approach to defending the faith.

This crucial element is self-deception. A simple, untechnical definition of self-deception: "self-deception involves deception of the self, by the self, about the self, and for the sake of the self." (Greg Bahnsen). Unbelievers deceive themselves about themselves, about God, about Christ, about the world, about the judgment to come and many other vital spiritual truths. Unbelievers are experts at pulling the wool over their own eyes. But before we get too self-righteous, all people do this. Anyone who is a sinful human being is an expert at self-deception.

Cultural Manifestations of Self-Deception

That's why the concept of self-deception is so common, even outside of explicitly religious contexts. Think of some of the great works of literature produced over the centuries. Among the Greeks, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles comes to mind. Shakespeare portrayed self-deception in *King Lear*. In Russian literature, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is a prime example. Closer to our own time and culture, C.S. Lewis captured both the literary and religious aspects of self-deception in the first of the Chronicles of Narnia, *the Magician's Nephew*:

...the longer and more beautifully the Lion sang, the harder Uncle Andrew tried to make himself believe that he could hear nothing but roaring. Now the trouble about trying to make yourself stupider than you really are is that you very often succeed. Uncle Andrew did. He soon did hear nothing but roaring in Aslan's song.

In the area of film, we can think of Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*. In case you didn't catch it, the title for these articles comes from an old 80s pop song, *I Ain't Missing You*, by John Waite. Self-deception is a common theme in literature, film, music, and culture in general, to say nothing of its treatment by philosophers and theologians through the centuries.

This is a subject that has received its share of attention from those who study the field of apologetics. In 1985, Greg Bahnsen debated a renowned atheist scholar, Dr. Gordon Stein. In his introductory comments, Bahnsen agreed to concede to Stein all issues pertaining to *the Control of Ovarian Maturation in Japanese Whales*, the subject of Stein's doctoral dissertation and his area of scholarly expertise. Stein tried to turn the tables on Bahnsen by making a jab at Bahnsen's dissertation on self-deception. However, this backfired -- because unlike Stein, Bahnsen's dissertation was extremely relevant to this debate and Bahnsen milked Stein's gaffe for all it was worth.

Let's now get to the meat of our subject. We're going to look at what the Bible says about self-deception and then we'll consider how that Biblical teaching shapes a Reformed approach to apologetics.

What the Bible Says About Self-Deception

The theme of self-deception is found in many places in Scripture. It flows from a basic truth about human beings, a truth found in Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Human beings have hearts that are inclined to deceit, to lying and untruthfulness. Later in Jeremiah, in 37:9, we hear God warning the people of Judah, “Do not deceive yourselves, thinking, ‘the Babylonians will surely leave us.’” -- implying that self-deception is certainly a possibility. In the little prophecy of Obadiah, we discover that self-deception is not just a possibility but a reality. In verse 3, God says about Edom, “The pride of your heart has deceived you...”

In the New Testament, we find that reality reaffirmed. In James 1:22 those who merely listen to the word and don't do it are those who deceive themselves. In 1 Corinthians 3:18, those who think they are wise by the standards of this world are deceiving themselves and are warned to stop. In Galatians 6:3, “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” And in 1 John 1:8, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”

With a view to unbelief and our subject of defending the faith, Psalm 14:1 and Psalm 53:1 also speak about self-deception, though perhaps it's not immediately obvious: “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”” When we look at this verse, the first thing we need to understand is that the word 'fool' here is not an insult. Rather it's an objective description of a certain type of person. In the Old Testament wisdom literature, a fool is someone who acts foolishly in a moral and spiritual sense. The foolish are those who reproach the righteous and blaspheme God. Strikingly, the foolish in the Old Testament are also usually part of God's covenant people. In other words, they know better. This unbelief that even exists among God's people is a specimen of self-deception.

David makes this disturbing observation that a certain kind of person (the fool) makes a claim that there is no God. Notice where this claim is made: in his heart. This self-deception isn't necessarily announced out loud. In the context of these Psalms, it probably wouldn't be prudent to say such things publicly in Israel -- the fool says it in his heart.

It's from out of the heart that one's lifestyle emerges. Verse 1 goes on to say, “They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.” In Matthew 15:19, the Lord Jesus said, “For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies.” Then it only make sense that David proceeds in Psalms 14/53 from what's going on in the heart, to what's going on in the life. The fool says in his heart that there is no God and that among such people there are no good works. This serves to emphasize that this atheism is not an intellectual problem, but a moral one. Unbelieving mankind's problem is not a lack of information, but a twisted, degenerate, deceitful heart that results in reprehensible behaviour. Mankind's greatest need is not more information, more evidence, or more arguments, but rather a Saviour. We need one who can save us from ourselves, from our deceitful hearts and the wrath of God that those hearts incur.

The Crucial Passage: Romans 1:18-32

The Apostle Paul was well-trained in the Old Testament and he would have been familiar with Psalms 14/53. He was also a missionary who regularly encountered unbelief, both among the Jews and the Gentiles. So, it should come as no surprise that the most significant passage about self-deception is found in the letters of Paul in Romans 1:18-32.

Some time ago, I was asked to go to the hospital to visit someone dying from cancer. This man had left our church many years ago and a family member asked me to speak with him. He was friendly enough and from the nurses I spoke with, he was definitely dying. But yet he denied that he had cancer. He didn't want to talk about cancer -- he was sure that he was going home next week, that he wasn't dying. Yes, he admitted that he hadn't been feeling well; that was all because of a car accident last year. He was positively sure that he was going to be all right.

Similarly, when Hurricane Ike hit the Texas coast a while back, you could hear people on the news saying things like, "I don't believe it's coming. I think the weather reports are wrong." Many people chose to stay rather than evacuate, believing that either the storm wouldn't come at all, or if it did, it wouldn't actually be that bad.

Romans 1:18-32 portrays something very much like that. Verse 19 says, "what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them." Unbelievers are portrayed as knowing about God because God has been successful in revealing himself to them. In other words, at some level, all people know that God exists.

However, verse 18 reveals that though people have this knowledge at some level, not all people acknowledge it. In fact, this verse says that many suppress the truth by their wickedness or unrighteousness. They deceive themselves about God. They actively push what they know about God under and they do this *in unrighteousness*. This underlines what we learned from Psalms 14/53. This is not an intellectual failure. It's not the case that they've missed some key evidence or not heard some key arguments, or perhaps they're just not smart enough to be Christians. Rather, this is a moral, ethical issue. According to verse 20, God's invisible attributes, which Paul isolates as God's eternal power and divine nature -- they have been **clearly** seen and all this leaves everyone without excuse. Literally, in Greek it says that they are without an apologetic, without a reasonable defense for the position they've taken. That means that everyone comes before God's throne with responsibility for what they've done with the revelation given. And everyone comes before that throne with some revelation.

Verse 21 goes on to add that they knew God. Now that's an important expression which we ought not to gloss over. In verse 19 it speaks about unbelievers knowing **about** God, but here in verse 21, it says that they **know** God. This is significant. People say that there are no atheists in foxholes. Paul says that there are no atheists period. In the Bible, to know God is often synonymous with relating to him or believing in him, being persuaded of the truth of his existence. That means that there's not only a suppression of

knowledge about God, but also a suppression of some kind of belief in God. This "belief" (if we dare to call it that) is something along the lines of what we read about the demons in James 2:19. So, there's not only a suppression of facts about God, but also a suppression of persuasion about God's existence and relationship to the person as Creator and Judge.

All this wicked suppression, all this evil self-deception has a result: futility, aimlessness, purposelessness in thinking and the darkening of foolish hearts. Foolishness leads to idolatry, to sexual impurity, to shameful homosexual lusts and relations and perversion. Paul relates that unbelievers are given over to their depraved minds and we ought not to be surprised when we see wickedness, evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife and so forth taking place in their lives. We should actually be surprised when we don't see those things in the lives of unbelievers! Consistent unbelief results in all those things. Now of course, most unbelievers are not that consistent in their unbelief and for that we can be thankful!

One more thing to note from Romans 1. In verse 32 we are told that unbelievers also know about God's righteous decrees. They know God's law -- the same point is made in more detail in chapter 2. They also know that those who break God's law deserve death. In other words, they are also aware of the judgment that sin will receive. Deep within, every single human being knows that they are a creature of God, that they have broken God's law and they will stand in judgment for that. But they suppress these truths in unrighteousness; they deceive themselves.

In the concluding installment, we'll consider what the Reformed confessions say about this subject and then consider the question of how to address unbelieving self-deception.

This two-part series of articles was originally a presentation for the Cloverdale Canadian Reformed Church. In preparing this material, I made grateful use of Greg Bahnsen's article The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics (Westminster Theological Journal 57 (1995): 1-31) – available on-line here: <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA207.htm> Readers interested in a more technical treatment on this subject should consult Bahnsen's article and his dissertation on the same subject, A Conditional Resolution of the Apparent Paradox of Self-Deception, Ph.D. diss., University of Southern California, 1978.

I Can Lie to Myself: Self-Deception and Apologetics (Part 2)

By W.L. Breidenhof

In the first part, we noted that Scripture provides much data with regards to self-deception. One of the crucial passages is Romans 1:18-32. In that passage, we discover that unbelievers “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” They know God, they know about God, they know of his righteous decrees, and yet they refuse to submit to him in faith. They rebelliously deceive themselves.

The Reformed Confessions

Since these vital truths are found in Scripture, we shouldn't be surprised to find them echoed in our confessions. In Belgic Confession article 2, for instance, we find a direct quote from part of Romans 1:20 and a paraphrase of the other part. The Confession speaks about convicting people with this revelation of the invisible things of God. Of course, the idea of conviction goes hand in hand with judgment. Unbelievers will be judged with respect to what they have known and believed, but yet suppressed in unrighteousness. They are without excuse, without a foot to stand on before God's face.

Chapter III/IV of the Canons of Dort also speaks about this self-deception in article 4. The Canons are speaking there about the so-called light of nature, what Calvin called the seed of religion (*semen religionis*) or the sense of divinity (*sensus divinitatis*). Unbelievers have some notions about God, but they do not have a saving knowledge of God -- in fact, they're far from that. Instead, this light is polluted and suppressed by man's wickedness and the result is the same as what we find in Romans 1:18-32: “he renders himself without excuse before God.”

Now imagine that cancer patient I mentioned last time. He was dying. But he did not believe it and did not want to talk about it. Would a good doctor allow him to go on with that self-deception? Obviously not. If the cancer had been detected on time, he would tell him that there is hope. He needs to have surgery to deal with the tumour, he needs chemo or radiation therapy to destroy the cancer in his body. A good doctor would never allow the self-deception to continue, he would not facilitate it or encourage it, but he would confront it.

Or take the situation with Hurricane Ike. There were people who denied that the hurricane was coming or that it would be severe. The authorities would not encourage or facilitate the self-deception of those who decided to stay. They couldn't force them to leave, but they were warned that they would face certain death by staying. Some of them did stay. One woman was interviewed on the news afterwards and they asked her whether she would do it again or what advice she would give to those who would stay through a hurricane. Her advice was one word: “Run.”

The self-deception of our unbelieving friends, family, neighbours, co-workers, and fellow students cannot be countenanced. It cannot be facilitated or encouraged. Rather, if we take the Scriptures seriously, we discover that unbelief, that self-deception, has to be

challenged and exposed for what it is, foolishness and rebellion against God which will be judged. We have to be good doctors who tell the truth about the terminal disease and its miraculous cure, good weather forecasters who tell the truth about the coming storm and the Person with whom to find shelter.

The Content of Self-Deception

Unbelievers are self-deceived about God. They may deny his existence or assert that this existence is unproven, or they may have their own home-grown ideas about God. For instance, they may believe that God is basically like Santa Claus -- he knows if you've been good or bad, but in the end just about everybody gets the presents. We need to engage our unbelieving friends on what they believe about God, we need to point out their inconsistencies and rationalizations and then expose it all as self-deception.

Unbelievers are self-deceived about themselves. They may believe themselves to be basically good people, they may believe that they are the masters of their own destiny, a law unto themselves. We need to bring these thoughts out in the open and then reveal them as being self-deception.

Unbelievers are self-deceived about the world. They may believe that the world is a product of chance, they may believe that everything that exists is material only (materialism), that things like moral laws and the laws of logic are merely social conventions, that reality is an illusion or any number of other delusions. Here too, we need to engage our friends and unmask these self-deceptions.

Confronting Self-Deception

But then we need to ask the question: how? How do we confront this self-deception? On our way to answering that, I want to briefly consider the alternatives to a Reformed answer. There are basically two alternatives out there: Roman Catholic and Arminian. Both teach to one degree or another the doctrine of man's free will. They teach that unbelieving man actually is a law unto himself or autonomous in some sense. Unbelieving people can reason quite well, they can even make consistent rational conclusions with God's assistance. Both Roman Catholics and Arminians flatter the natural man. They don't see the root problem of unbelief and so they don't really address it.

The method of Roman Catholic apologetics is primarily to use rational arguments to prove God's existence and the truth of the Christian faith as they understand it. Arminian apologetics will take the same approach, but there the emphasis is often placed on evidence -- that's why it's often called evidential apologetics. However, using these methods is like weeding a field and only taking out what's on the surface. It's the roots that are giving the problem and it's the roots that the believer who's defending his or her faith needs to get at.

The Reformed churches have always strongly rejected the notion that unbelieving man's

will is free. We know that salvation is a gift of God which comes entirely by grace through faith alone. When it comes to salvation, we reject free will and autonomy. Obviously, it wouldn't make any sense to welcome this idea into how we defend the faith. If we reject Arminian thinking about how salvation comes to us, then how could we turn around and use those same doctrines in apologetics? We need consistency.

Consistency demands that we scratch the unbeliever where he or she truly itches. Not where they *think* they're itching, but where we know from God's Word that they truly itch. Our task is to expose the sinful self-deception and foolishness of unbelief, so that we can also present the gospel as the only hope that we have. We do this by undermining the presuppositions or fundamental beliefs of the unbeliever. Presuppositions are our most fundamental, unquestioned beliefs; taken together all our presuppositions make up the way we view the world, our worldview. We recognize that every person has presuppositions. For instance, at a basic level, every one assumes the truth of basic arithmetic like $2 + 2 = 4$. No one questions that in a real, meaningful way. These presuppositions extend to all areas of life. People have presuppositions about science, the uniformity of nature, morality, communication and reality.

When we engage unbelievers regarding the faith, we need to place some of their most crucial presuppositions under a critical microscope, examining them for consistency. We also allow our own presuppositions about ultimate things to be placed under that same microscope. Whose presuppositions are the most consistent with the way the world really is? This method (what we can call a presuppositional method) is geared towards exposing the self-deception of unbelievers. It's suggested to us by Proverbs 26:4,5. "Do not answer a fool according to his folly" -- that means, present the truth (the wisdom) of Scripture, have the unbeliever step into your shoes so that he can see the way in which the Biblical worldview makes sense of everything. "Answer a fool according to his folly" -- that means, expose the foolishness and falsity of unbelief by stepping into the unbeliever's presuppositions (his self-deception) and showing how it fails to arrive at any degree of consistency.

We need to argue from the impossibility of the contrary. The Christian faith, the Christian worldview is true because of the impossibility of the contrary. We need to demonstrate that, as Bahnsen put it, "only Christianity provides the preconditions of intelligibility for man's experience and reasoning. If Christianity were not true, the unbeliever could not prove or understand anything." This is a Biblical argument developed out of passages such as Acts 17:28, Romans 11:36 and Colossians 1:17. At first glance, it sounds complicated, but it really isn't. All we're saying is that the world is exactly the way the Christian worldview says it is, the way that God says it is in Scripture -- and not the way the unbeliever says it is.

Concluding Observations from 1 Peter 3:15

I want to conclude with a couple of practical points from 1 Peter 3:15, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect..."

Gentleness is one aspect of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. It can also be translated as “meekness.” Meekness is the complete opposite of having a violent character and blowing your top all the time at the most insignificant annoyances. A meek person is not easily excited, but is rather humble, level-headed, subdued. But that doesn’t mean being a push-over. It implies being both firm and friendly. So, when it comes to giving an answer, we keep our cool and we don’t blow up in fits of anger or frustration when someone asks why we’re believers in Christ and his Word.

Peter also speaks about respect as we defend our faith. Here we’re exhorted to respect the dignity of the person who is engaging us about the faith. In practical terms, this means that we never belittle or insult an unbeliever. Even though God’s Word says that they deceive themselves, we’re not to degrade or patronize them -- particularly, since we ourselves are so often guilty of exactly the same thing! We should never treat them as if they’re intellectually stupid or dull because they don’t believe. Though the Bible says that those who deny God’s existence are fools, we should keep in mind that this is not name-calling but a moral judgment from God. Our calling is to expose the foolishness of self-deception and unbelief, not to engage in name-calling. We respect unbelievers, recognizing that that they are also people created in God’s image. When it comes down to it, without the grace of God in our lives, without the gospel, we’re exactly like them. We’re not better, just redeemed. The defense of our faith begins with an attitude of humility. This is not a time to flex our intellectual muscles so that others will fall down before us and fawn over us. Rather, we’re interested in seeing people fall before the Lord of lords and that path is paved with a gentle and respectful manner.

Biblical or Reformed apologetics by itself will not bring anyone to faith in Jesus Christ. For that, we need the sovereign and gracious work of the Holy Spirit. One should never get the idea that apologetics is a way to argue people into the kingdom of heaven. Apologetics can only be truly Biblical, and therefore Reformed, when the person using it acknowledges the work of the Spirit in converting sinners and when the person realizes that he is only a very small instrument in God’s hands. God can use apologetics and us to bring in those whom he has chosen from before the foundation of the world. Conversely, he can also use Biblical apologetics to harden the hearts of unbelievers even further, magnifying his glory through his just judgment on them (Proverbs 16:4). Like the Word upon which it relies, apologetics is a two-edged sword, leading some to the gospel and to repentance, belief and salvation, while others are left under God’s just judgment and condemnation.

I’m glad there is increased interest in apologetics as of late. However, there is a danger that we fail to see the necessity of a consistently Reformed, *a Biblical* approach and instead we treat it like a buffet, taking some from the Roman Catholics, some from the Arminians and then maybe some from wherever else. Then in 20 or 30 years someone comes along and says “The emperor has no clothes. We have Reformed theology, but we don’t have Reformed apologetics. There’s no consistency.” That would be a tragedy. It would be compounded by the fact that a Reformed approach has **already** been developed by Cornelius VanTil, Greg Bahnsen and others. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel.

Yes, there is room for improvement, but the basic parameters are already in place.

This notion of self-deception that we've been looking at is at the heart of Reformed apologetics. No school of apologetics which ignores or minimizes these Biblical truths about self-deception can be called Reformed. If you read a book about apologetics and it doesn't deal with the self-deception of unbelief, it's simply not a Reformed book. There may still be something helpful there, but you have to recognize that there is a fundamental difference of approach. Let me conclude with a quote from VanTil. It comes from the introduction to his book, *the Defense of the Faith*:

Nothing short of the Christ of the Scriptures, as presented in historic Reformed theology, can challenge men to forsake their sin and establish them in truth and life. If only Reformed theologians were true to their own principles and ideas! How often does it not prove true that Arminian Christians are, in practice, more truly biblical and Reformed than are those who speak of Calvin as their leader? If only the present writer, in presuming to differ from Reformed thinkers of the past and present, were true to his principles and ideals! Truly, with Augustine, our prayer should ever be for humility and more humility. Even so, necessity is laid upon us. The gospel must be heard without compromise. The whole world lies in darkness.

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