

# A Review of Norm Geisler's Prolegomena

© 2017 by A Jacob W. Reinhardt, All Rights Reserved. Copyright holder grants permission to reduplicate article as long as it is not changed. Send further requests to jacob@ajwr.info.

Dr. Norman L. Geisler has been one of the foremost Christian apologists during the last 50 years. He has written books on everything from open theism to ethics to higher criticism and more. Later in his career, he has also authored a four volume systematic theology<sup>1</sup> which was consolidated into a one-volume edition as well.<sup>2</sup> Like traditional systematic theologies, his work includes a prolegomena section that outlines his method of doing theology as well as preconditions. This paper will summarize his prolegomena, identify strengths and weaknesses, and provide an evaluation of how useful his approach is for developing and grounding a Biblically faithful systematic theology that is appropriately balanced in its use of both philosophical arguments and biblical arguments. The first task is to summarize his prolegomena and the consequent theological method proposed.<sup>3</sup>

## Summary of the Geisler's Prolegomena

This prolegomena is extensive, at about one-hundred fifty-two pages in twelve chapters in the one-volume edition. Following an introductory chapter, what follows are 11 chapters cast as preconditions that are necessary for a distinctively Christian theology. The preconditions developed include the following: (1) Theism, the metaphysical precondition; (2) Miracles, the supernatural precondition; (3) Revelation, the revelational precondition; (4) Logic, the rational precondition; (5) Meaning, the semantical precondition; (6) Truth, the epistemological precondition; (7) Exclusivism, the oppositional precondition; (8) Language, the linguistic precondition; (9) Interpretation, the hermeneutical precondition; (10) Historiography, the historical precondition; and (11) Method, the methodological precondition. It is helpful to view the methodological precondition as really the synthesis of the preconditions and the formulation of Geisler's theological method, therefore seeing ten preconditions leading to the single theological method. There is definitely an interrelation between these various preconditions and they do build on each other to some extent. Geisler himself summarizes the overall approach in a helpful way in the introductory chapter. The following outline<sup>4</sup> illustrates this summary with minimal modifications:

- 
1. Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002-2005).
  2. Idem, *Systematic Theology in One Volume* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011).
  3. Note that this paper used the one-volume edition.
  4. Note that this is not an outline strictly speaking, because there is no second point on the first level. This is so to keep the structure of Geisler's summary as a single sentence with each of these subsequent points being dependent clauses.

1. The theistic God exists in a pluralist universe.
  - a. This God does miracles.
  - b. This God has revealed Himself in general and special revelation.
    - i. This revelation is logical.
    - ii. This revelation contains meaningful statements
      1. These statements are true
        - a. They are true objectively.
        - b. They are true exclusively,
      2. These statements can be understood.
        - a. They can be understood analogically.
        - b. They can be understood objectively.
        - c. They can be understood historically.
    - iii. This revelation can be systematized using a proper theological method

These preconditions are not just presented briefly as an assumption. They are also defended, and there is extensive apologetic interaction with opposing views on each point. In this point, the prolegomena definitely serves as providing an overall defense of the Christian worldview in general to both the unsaved and the saved, albeit within a Thomistic framework as evidenced by starting with theism and then going to revelation. This work can also be characterized by rigorous logic, by philosophical sensitivity not to the exclusion of Biblical material, by an affirmation of objective interpretation of God's revelation, by an affirmation of analogous religious language with a univocal meaning behind the analogy, by a denial of more than one truth, by an affirmation of the historical nature of Christianity and its miracles, and by an aversion to anti-Christian presuppositions in both philosophy and methodology.

His concluding chapter on method begins with discussion of various possible methods, and then offers something of a hybrid methodology that takes from several different methods. His primary criteria for his method include the following:

- (1) The method should fit its object.
- (2) The method should not be contrary to the results it is supposed to produce.
- ...
- (3) No one method can suffice for the many steps involved in developing an evangelical Theology....

From here, he offers a nine step method that is as follows<sup>5</sup>: (1) An inductive basis in Scripture, (2) a deduction of truths from Scripture, (3) the use of analogies, (4) the use of general revelation, (5) the retroductive method, (6) systematic correlation (of all information into a fully orb'd doctrine through use of the laws of logic that insist all truth must be noncontradictory), (7) each doctrine is correlated with all other doctrines, (8) each doctrine is expressed in view of the orthodox teachings of the church fathers, and (9) livability is the final

---

5. Geisler, *Systematic Theology in One Volume*, 159—164.

test for practical theology. This method may be seen to have two primary inputs, special revelation and general revelation. Additionally, the method includes the application of logic both to deduct truth from Scripture and to systematize the truth both within a given doctrine as well as across multiple doctrines. Finally the method includes several levels of verification, including the internal through the retroductive method, the historical through church history, and the personal/practical. All through out, Geisler attempts to keep Scripture as the primary source<sup>6</sup> even if he admits general revelation in some way, and recognizes that truth is not determined by external sources in the church<sup>7</sup> or our ability to live it<sup>8</sup> but that those do serve a valid part of our theological method.

### **Strengths of Geisler's Prolegomena**

What are the key strengths of Geisler's prolegomena? First, Geisler provides a good example of defending ones preconditions, which is sorely needed in our culture that denies the fundamentals of Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Second, his discussion of logic and God's relation to it is significant.<sup>10</sup> He affirms that God is before logic in terms of ontology, but that "it is our statements about God that are subject to logic."<sup>11</sup> Third, he affirms the possibility of certainty when it comes to inductive study of the Bible because it is a limited set of data.<sup>12</sup> Fourth, he clearly rejects anti-Christian presuppositions and methods.<sup>13</sup> Fifth, he affirms objective interpretation of the Bible through textual hermeneutics<sup>14</sup> and the single meaning of the text affirmed by both the human and divine author.<sup>15</sup> Finally, in discussion of both exclusivism<sup>16</sup> and historiography<sup>17</sup> he denies the possibility of neutrality as such and the necessity of a worldview to rightly interpret the facts of history. Overall, Geisler had several strengths in his prolegomena. Are there any weaknesses?

---

6. Ibid., 161.

7. Ibid., 163.

8. Ibid., 164.

9. Ibid., 14.

10. Ibid., 68—69.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 66. Granted, he does not specify absolute certainty here. But, his formulation of certainty here seems sufficient because he admits that we can at least theoretically examine inductively every Bible passage and this is a greater degree than the certainty that may be said for other inductive studies that do not have a limited size.

13. Ibid., 157—158.

14. Ibid., 126—128.

15. Ibid., 128, n22.

16. Ibid., 100.

17. e.g. ibid., 141—142.

### **Weaknesses of Geisler's Prolegomena**

There are two key areas that are a weakness in Geisler's prolegomena. First, there is concern in the way his entire system is grounded in a deductive Cartesian argument for theism, and Geisler clearly shows that he believes it is the strongest argument for undergirding the worldview.<sup>18</sup> Now, it is possible to utilize such an argument even if one is not a Thomist.<sup>19</sup> However, non-Thomists of the presuppositional variety might rightly desire for a discussion of relevant Biblical texts regarding theism and the associated topic of pluralism. Secondly, and somewhat related, is the weakness he creates by the inclusion of general revelation in his theological method<sup>20</sup> and the inclusion of such areas as science, art, music, etc. in general revelation.<sup>21</sup> Primarily, there is a lack of Biblical proof for these additional areas as being valid. Additionally, following his discussion of inductive logic,<sup>22</sup> it seems a perfect induction is much harder concerning general revelation and thus we lose certainty for the parts upon which we depend on general revelation. It just seems advisable to limit theology to that which we can be certain about.<sup>23</sup> Overall, Geisler's strengths provide good promise for developing a Christian systematic theology and his weaknesses can be mitigated by some slight modifications of his theological method. An overall evaluation with reference to its theological accuracy, usefulness for the reader, and use of philosophy will now be offered.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Norman Geisler's prolegomena overall is accurate to Biblical truth. The most glaring element that is not theologically accurate is the matter of general revelation and what it consists of. Geisler includes areas outside of the revelation of God in nature and the revelation of natural law in man's conscience. These additional areas are difficult to substantiate Biblically. It is better to regard these areas as gifts of common grace in so much as they correspond to reality, rather than introduce them into our theology.<sup>24</sup> General revelation primarily reveals

---

18. e.g. *ibid.*, 155.

19. John M. Frame as a presuppositionalist admits that one can incorporate traditional (viz. Thomist) arguments in the overall framework of the transcendental argument used by presuppositionalists, see "Presuppositional Apologetics," published May 23, 2012, accessed April 22, 2017, <http://frame-poythress.org/presuppositional-apologetics/>.

20. e.g. Geisler, *Systematic Theology in One Volume*, 161—162.

21. *Ibid.*, 54—60.

22. e.g. *ibid.*, 66—68.

23. At this point, a discussion of Geisler's perspective of Genesis 1 would seem appropriate, but his comments on this topic have not been reviewed and thus must be left outside the scope of this paper. For his perspective on the days of Genesis 1, see *Ibid.*, 1526-1533.

24. Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2002). Kindle edition, loc. 1125-1137.

God's existence,<sup>25</sup> and in that much it overlaps with special revelation and does not add to it. It is not that all truth is not God's truth. There should be a distinction between systematic theology which limits itself to what the Bible teaches, and a worldview that includes both systematic theology and the other disciplines. Additionally, something not yet mentioned is that Geisler helpfully admits that while the text may be infallible, our interpretations are not.<sup>26</sup> He does provide a solution through his theological method, both the primary methodological steps and the steps of retroduction, comparison to church history and livability. As always though, one must be careful with the impact that church history and livability have because both can be wrong, but overall Geisler was fair in both areas even if there is some disagreement in the precise wording and emphasis. As far as the balance between biblical and philosophical elements, if we remove the elements of general revelation from his theological method, his approach is good in this respect. The proper method may permit the utilization of philosophical arguments in the defense of the preconditions but mostly focus on biblical sources in the actual task of doing theology. On a somewhat minor point, he also could've included some Biblical lines of evidence in defense of theism as the most important precondition. Instead, he utilized exclusively philosophical arguments in that topic. Regardless of the concerns mentioned, his work is very useful for the reader. He has included a comprehensive defense of the Christian worldview in this prolegomena and thus, if one accepts his entire system, he is left with a fully grounded Christian worldview and a proper method by which to discover the truth. To this, the reader will benefit from utilizing his prolegomena. With such a foundation, one would hope that his theological conclusions will be biblical. This work is a useful resource for students of theology.

---

25. Ibid., loc. 1085.

26. Geisler, *Systematic Theology in One Volume*, 59.

### **Bibliography**

- Frame, John M. "Presuppositional Apologetics." Published May 23, 2012. Accessed April 22, 2017. <http://frame-poythress.org/presuppositional-apologetics/>.
- Geisler, Norman L. *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2002-2005.
- , *Systematic Theology in One Volume*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011.
- Thomas, Robert L. *Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old*. Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2002. Kindle edition.