Must a Presbyterian be Presuppositionalist?

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I have increasingly had the experience in recent years of meeting people who listed Presuppositionalism as one of fundamentals of "truly Reformed" teaching. Many of the proponents of this system title their adult classes "Reformed epistemology" or "Reformed apologetics," as if no other system is acceptable Reformed thinking; indeed, some scholars have elevated this system to the level of "doctrine." John Frame, for example, titled his massive exposition of presuppositionalism, The Doctrine of the Justification of Knowledge, as though it were the final word. Even further, some "truly Reformed" Christians feel no constraint against leveling the charge of heresy against those with differing systems of epistemology, as I can attest from personal experience.

There is no doubt that many "Reformed" Christians find Presuppositionalism the most satisfying system of epistemology, and find that it fits naturally in many ways with their understanding of classic Reformed doctrines such as predestination and the inerrancy of Scripture. Before we declare the discussion closed, however, I would like to give a brief argu-

ment for keeping an open mind toward another system, popularly known as "evidentialism," as a good "Reformed" position.

Is Discussion of Epistemology a Worthwhile Debate?

Is a discussion on epistemology akin to discussing how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Certainly many people would say so. This feeling may have more to do with the way they have heard people argue about epistemology than with the subject of epistemology itself, however. Epistemology deals with some of the most important issues of life.

The word "epistemology" means "the study of how we know things." As such, it deals with things tremendously important in daily life. First, it deals with how we learn, that is, how we begin to know. When we teach our children, teach new believers, or study things ourselves, we rely on assumptions about epistemology. When can we say the student now "knows" something? What prior knowledge may we use as a building block for advancing further knowledge? Do other people (e.g. teachers) have anything to do with new knowledge?

Some systems of epistemology make a divorce between learning and knowledge; that is, they say the "justification" of knowledge has nothing to do with the learning process. This is itself an epistemological statement with tremendous implications.

Epistemology also deals with how we approach a person who *denies* knowledge that we

say we have. As such, it is the foundation of apologetics and evangelism. On what basis can I say that the other person is wrong, and that in fact, I do have knowledge? Do we have any knowledge in common at all? Is it possible to persuade that person to believe something new, that is, to come to have new knowledge?

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, epistemology deals with my own sense of certainty about what I know. If I am plagued with doubt about something, I can not act on it with boldness. Christians want to say "I know" that Jesus lives, and so on. "Faith," which is central to the Christian message, is the word "pistos" in the New Testament, whence our word "epistemology." A person with faith knows he knows. Can I choose to know something? Is it possible to know something and still have some doubt about it?

There is no doubt about the importance of the subject of epistemology. Precisely because it has so many implications, it is very difficult to find agreement on many basic questions. For this reason, we must carefully avoid pitfalls for ourselves and wild accusations against those who disagree.

Defining Terms

Part of the difficulty in discussing this subject is the problem of agreeing on terminology.

Presuppositions and Evidence. A first confusion occurs in regard to the terms "presupposition" and "evidence." These concepts are not exclusively the domain of one system or the other. All presuppositionalists use evidence, and all evidentialists use presuppositions.

A "presupposition" is, as its etymology suggests, a predisposition to believe something. It is a kind of knowledge that leads to judgments about other kinds of knowledge. Other words for a presupposition are an "assumption," an "axiom," a "bias," a "categorization," an "expectation," a "generality," a "theory," a "norm," a "law," an "organizing principle," a "world view," or a "framework for thought."

"Evidence" is knowledge that does not by itself lead a person to be predisposed toward anything. It takes its meaning in regard to a theory, or presupposition, about something. Certain facts may act as "evidence" to either support or undermine a general belief.

The debate between presuppositionalists and evidentialists is not about whether presuppositions or evidence are important. Cornelius van Til, the founder of modern presuppositionalism, frequently used evidence in apologetic discourses, and Francis Schaeffer, probably the most well known recent Presbyterian evidentialist, continually talked about the importance of presuppositions.

The debate centers around which kind of knowledge is the *starting point.* Presuppositionalists say that people know effectively *nothing* until they have a correct presupposition. A presupposition is *required* for knowledge. Evidentialists say that people know many things

even from birth that are not organized into any system of thought. Presuppositions, general statements about the world and what to expect, come later. These arise first as unjustified "hypotheses" which are adopted as presuppositions or discarded depending on their agreement with evidence.

Clearly these two kinds of knowledge are quite entangled, so that deciding which comes first is not trivial. If a person has a certain presupposition, he may refuse to look for certain evidence, or deny its reality if confronted. Presuppositionalists argue on this basis that *all* evidence is "tainted" by some prior assumption. On the other hand, a presupposition is a belief about something. To have a belief, or bias, about that "something," a person must first know that the "something" exists. So knowledge of that something *preceded* the presupposition! As Augustine said, "For who can not see that thinking is prior to believing? For no one believes anything unless he had first thought that it is to be believed." For example, the assumption, "All balls are red," entails prior knowledge of what "balls" and "redness" are.

Even before attempting to resolve this issue, one can see that it has watershed implications for how we approach discussions. An evidentialist feels free to question *any* proposition, even core beliefs. The presuppositionalist insists that certain propositions are not open to debate, since no other truth exists that could call them into question.

Proof and Certainty. Another area of confusion centers around the words "proof"

and "certainty." When is something "proven" to be true? The origin of the word "proof" in the English language comes from the concept of making a test: a sword was "proven" by striking it, a person was "proven" in battle, etc. Following the resurrection of Greek philosophy in modern thought, mathematicians adopted this word to refer to a much more restricted process. Given any proposition, the rules of logic tell how to restate it without self contradiction. If the initial proposition, or "axiom," is absolutely certain, then all such restatements are "proven" to have the same absolute certainty.

Since all logic is merely this rule of non-contradiction as applied to complex assumptions, the validity of the conclusions lies entirely in the validity of the assumptions. Where does one get axioms of absolute certainty?

The oldest school, which includes Aristotle, Aquinas, and Descartes, and is called "rationalism," argues that perfectly certain axioms can be found in the set of non-contradictable, "self-evident" statements. These are statements for which no one can imagine a doubt, for example, "I think, therefore I am," or "Nothing can not exist." R.C. Sproul, J. Gerstner, and A. Lindsley embraced rationalism in their book, Classical Apologetics, and since then have attempted to resurrect the reputation of Aquinas and Descartes in their magazine, Tabletalk.

Presuppositionalists embrace much more broad and far-reaching axioms, for instance "All of the Bible is true." One can certainly imagine a doubt about such an axiom, but

presuppositionalists allow none, by fiat. Having given a presupposition axiomatic status, only logical deductions are allowed. Questioning a presupposition is not allowed since logic provides no means of questioning axioms.

Evidentialists essentially reject the above mathematical definition of "proof" altogether, and return to the original "empirical" sense of the word. This is sometimes called "moral" or "legal" proof, since law courts use the process of weighing evidence and making tests in making judgments. When Perry Mason shouts "I have proved he is innocent!" no one looks for self-evident or axiomatic proof. An excellent essay by Simon Greenleaf in The Law Above the Law, by John Warwick Montgomery, applies this lawcourt reasoning to the Christian message; Josh McDowell's Evidence That Demands a Verdict appeals to the same sense of proof.

In a sense, one may say that evidentialists make every sense experience an "axiom" in the above mathematical picture. Jonathan Edwards presented this view, calling the senses "infallible." Our senses may give us incomplete information, but we do not doubt them because we can not– we have no other source of information. When we say our senses have deceived us, what we mean is that we made a judgment based on incomplete information. It is important to recognize here that when evidentialists talk about the "senses," they do not refer just to the five "external" senses of sight, hearing, etc., but also to "internal" sensations, including emotions and internal impressions, the sense of beauty, the sense of

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guilt, the sense of expectation, etc. The senses are everything that God writes directly into our consciousness. What they do not include is propositions of language, precisely what presuppositionalists make into axioms.

These two approaches to "proof" are sometimes called "inductive" versus "deductive." Rationalists and presuppositionalists use *deduction*, starting with axioms in a logical, step by step process. Evidentialists attempt to draw generalities from a mass of vaguely defined data in a process of *induction*. "Induction," in this sense, should not be confused with "logical induction," or "mathematical induction," which is actually a process of *deduction*. In that process, a rule relating different elements of an ordered set is assumed as an axiom, and a conclusion is deduced based on examination of some elements. Induction as used by evidentialists is not that process at all, but can be equated with the "Inductive Bible study method," taught by evangelicals like James Sire, and the "Scientific Method" as expounded, for example, by Francis Bacon.

Sometimes confusion arises because of a lack of understanding of how a person "draws" general conclusions from evidence in the inductive process. As Norm Geisler has said, the facts do not "speak for themselves." No one simply looks at a bunch of information and has a correct theory pop out from them. Instead, in the inductive process a person starts with a *hypothesis*, which is a generality that the person *imagines* to be true, or *wants* to be true. The inductive method does not require that a person remain "neutral" in regard to the

implications of certain observations! Unlike the deductive method, however, the inductive method demands that hypotheses be altered or dropped if they do not give predictions consistent with observation, even if they are theories we want to be true. This is the definition of honesty. Therefore an honest person may suppose and then discard a dozen or more hypotheses in attempting to draw an inductive conclusion, whether they are looking at a Bible passage or scientific data.[1] Only when a hypothesis has stood many tests of comparison to experience without contradiction can we say it has been "drawn" from the evidence.

The confusion about "proof" leads to a similar difficulty regarding the concept of "uncertainty." The axiomatic, "deductive" style of proof described above purports to lead to *absolute* certainty. This is because if axioms are taken as absolutely certain, then deductions from those axioms must also be absolutely certain, because logical deductions are really just ways of saying the same thing as the axioms without self-contradiction. Rationalists and presuppositionalists favor deductive proof for this reason– it gives an apparent "mathematical certainty" to their conclusions.[2]

If something is not proven in this sense, is it then "uncertain"? Rationalists and presuppositionalists say so. They allow only two possibilities: certainty and uncertainty. Evidentialists say there is a range of degrees of certainty, from complete ignorance to real faith. They believe that people can be *certain* about some things on the basis of "legal proof." Not only that, they say that the certainty of so-called "axioms" or presuppositions is illusory and

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never "absolute," because a clever person can always think of a way to doubt them. This is because every axiom, or presupposition, must be made from the words of a language, and all words have vague definitions. Vagueness of definitions is an inherent property of language.

It is therefore disingenuous to say that evidentialists think God "probably" exists, or that the Bible is "probably" true. The English language has many words for various degrees of certainty, and "probably" expresses less than utmost confidence. The evidentialist believer feels *certain* of the truths of Christianity. This is the same kind of certainty we have about many things in the "real world." For example, if a person were thinking about jumping off a plane without a parachute, we would not say he "probably" would die, we would say it was certain! No axiomatic proof of "perfect" certainty would be possible, however.

Ontology and Epistemology. Finally, confusion exists in regard to the difference between "ontology" and "epistemology." Epistemology, as discussed above, is the subject of how we know things. Ontology is the subject of how things exist. In the area of ontology, both evidentialists and presuppositionalists agree that everything exists because God made it so. They disagree in the area of epistemology, in regard to whether we first know a *presupposition* about God's creation, or whether we first know the creation itself.

The evidentialist believes that we can argue with a non-Christian on the basis of agreement about a common experience with the creation. Because of this, some presuppositionalists have accused evidentialists of acting as though man is independent of God ("au-

tonomous," in the words of van Til), because they do not first appeal to the existence of God. In saying this, they unjustly accuse evidentialists of an ontological error. Evidentialists affirm that our existence, and therefore our knowledge, depend on God. They do not agree that we must have a proper ontology (i.e., be a Christian) before we can know anything at all. Presuppositionalists, on the other hand, say that in a very real sense the non-Christian knows nothing, that none of their knowledge is a valid starting point for a discussion.

Different Schools of Thought

Another part of the problem of discussing epistemology with presuppositionalists is that several different schools of thought exist which all call themselves "presuppositionalist," perhaps partly because that word now has become equated with "Reformed orthodoxy." In my experience, at least four distinct schools of thought exist within Presbyterian and Reformed circles that all go by the name "presuppositionalist."

First is the classic Presuppositionalist school defined by Cornelius van Til and more recently by John Frame and Greg Bahnsen. This school says that in principle, a person with an open mind could deduce his way to belief in the existence of God on the basis of evidence. They argue, however, that the presuppositions of the non-Christian (i.e., every person, if the Spirit does not illumine him) so affect his perspective that nothing that he believes is true.

The only starting point for real knowledge is revolutionary adoption of the presuppositions of orthodox Christianity.

Having adopted the world view of Christianity, the Christian can then look back and say that he *could* have come to Christ and to the Bible on the basis of evidence, with his new presuppositions. This adds a comforting degree of self consistency (or "systematic coherence," in the Kuhnian terminology used by Norm Geisler.)

The new presuppositions which this school says a person must embrace are, therefore, basically general statements about the world. For example, a person must believe "God exists," and "God has spoken," or perhaps, "Christ is Lord." These suffice to let a person put all the evidence into perspective.

A second school, built on the teachings of Gordon Clark, views the van Til school as compromisers. In this view, every statement of the Bible is an axiom, a necessary presupposition. To doubt even one statement of the Bible is to fail to have faith. No justification can be given for any statement of the Bible whatsoever. Therefore the comfort of "self consistency" based on evidence is a chimera; reducing the necessary presuppositions of Christianity to anything less than the whole Bible is to impugn the Word of God.

Van Tillians call the Gordon Clark school "fideists." This is a pejorative term, which refers to "blind faith." To even refuse to allow tests of self consistency, to adopt the whole Bible without any idea of what it means, is a blind leap of faith, in the van Tillian view.

A third school can be called the "new Reformed" epistemology, represented by Alvin Plantinga and Howard van Till. Some have called this the "liberal wing" of Reformed thought, and indeed, it shows strong influence from non-orthodox existentialists, such as Michael Polanyi. This school says that each person forms his or her own set of fundamental presuppositions, and that these do not have to be the same for all Christians. Tests of self consistency are dropped, but this school would not insist, with Gordon Clark, that every statement, or for that matter any statement, of the Bible must be taken axiomatically. Rather, Christianity is seen as a broad set of vaguely defined common presuppositions.

Finally, some who call themselves presuppositionalists are disciples of Francis Schaeffer. As mentioned above, Francis Schaeffer was an evidentialist, and so are many of the people who love his books, thinking they are presuppositionalists! The source of the confusion is Schaeffer's constant use of the words "presupposition" and "presuppositional apologetics." As R. Reymond has adequately demonstrated in his book, The Justification of Knowledge, Schaeffer was nevertheless clearly an evidentialist. He believed that presuppositions could be debated and overturned on the basis of evidence. Perhaps the strongest statement of his evidentialism is his statement, "Scientific proof, philosophical proof, and religious proof follow the same rules," which included, for Schaeffer, the questions "Does it make sense?" and "Can I live with it?" A large part of his successful evangelistic approach was to allow the non-Christian the right to question fundamental teachings of Christianity, i.e. to allow

the validity of truth expressed by non-Christians and even to change his own opinions in response to them. This is antithetical to presuppositionalism, which would say that there exists no common ground between the Christian and the non-Christian, which could provide truth that stands in judgment over both non-Christian and Christian beliefs.

Of course, in addition to the above schools of presuppositionalism, there are also different schools of evidentialism. These are, perhaps, not so sharply defined, because no one has tried to define an evidentialist "orthodoxy." I have mentioned one school, represented by Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, which borrows strongly from the rationalism of Aquinas and Descartes while still using evidence in many instances. This school seems to have problems with the "uncertainty," i.e., less-than-perfect certainty, of inductive proof, and so wishes to use sense evidence in "airtight" proofs. The cause is hopeless, in my opinion.

Another school, well represented by E.J. Carnell and more recently James Warwick Montgomery, openly embraces "legal" proof by weight of evidence. Josh McDowell and Hugh Ross base evangelistic books with very wide influence on this approach. Francis Schaeffer also belongs essentially to this school, although he gives much more weight to "internal" evidence, e.g. questions like "Can I live with it?" than to the details of archeology and astronomy.

Yet another school takes a "liberal" approach to Scripture yet affirms most of the orthodox teaching of Christianity on the basis of evidence. C.S. Lewis and Malcolm Muggeridge are the best representatives of this approach. As stated above, however, most of these people

have not set up rival camps in regard to epistemology. In general, the feeling is the more evidence, the better.

Problems with Presuppositionalism

Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, in Classical Apologetics, have presented an extensive critique of presuppositionalism from their own unique perspective which combines elements of rationalism and evidentialism. Without going to the lengths that they have, I would like to discuss three primary weaknesses of the presuppositionalist system.

Problem 1: Irrelevance

The heart of the presuppositionalist system seems to be this: an insistence that "knowledge" has two components: first, the thing itself, and second, a *judgment* about the thing. We know the fact, and the *meaning* of the fact. Otherwise it is not knowledge. This definition goes all the way back to Plato.

If we accept this definition, presuppositionalism follows automatically, because a norm that yields judgments is a presupposition. Evidentialists do not accept this definition of knowledge! Evidentialists use the "normal" definition of knowledge, which is everything recorded by the mind. To recall knowledge, I do not need a norm of judgment; all I need is an "association" of an experience with another experience. When we talk about the "meaning"

of a word, all we mean in daily discourse is what other words or experiences that word is associated with. In this way a child can "know" the meaning of a word by repeated pointing, without ever forming a complex world view, much less an orthodox Christian world view. Presuppositionalists do not deny that this kind of knowledge exists, of course. They simply insist that it is irrelevant in bringing anyone to Christ or to knowledge of any significant truth.

Suppose we accept the presuppositionalist definition. Then our theory of knowledge has been reduced down to a very small set of experience that excludes most of normal life. Everything that I remember but do not make a judgment about is not knowledge; everything that I remember but make a wrong judgment about is false knowledge. If I think I have the correct presuppositions now, but later change my theology, then I will have to say that everything I think I know now is not knowledge!

John Frame, in his The Doctrine of the Justification of Knowledge, admits to the irrelevance of this approach. He freely states in his introduction that a person could go through life never knowing anything about presuppositionalism and still be quite happy. Presuppositionalists also say that their epistemology has nothing to do with teaching, because nothing the student learns is knowledge until *after* the student has learned the correct presuppositions. How we *actually* come to know, and how we *justify* that knowledge later, are sharply divided in presuppositionalist thought. Presuppositionalism has become an exercise for highly

trained theologians to secure their own belief against all attack.

Evidentialists believe that questions of relative certainty involved in the "common" definition of knowledge are crucial for daily life and decision making, and that these are the same judgments that we make about Christian doctrines. We want to be sure we know we will live forever, *in the same way* that we want to be sure we know our house will not fall down on us. "Presupposing" our house will not fall down brings scant comfort.

Problem 2: Circularity

The above definition of "knowledge" also leads to an interesting conundrum. If knowledge consists of a fact as judged by some rule, the rule must exist first. (This is why presuppositionalists say knowledge depends on presuppositions.) How then did I "know" that rule? To "know" that rule, I had to have a prior rule to judge it and give it a meaning (according to the presuppositionalist definition of knowledge). How did I know that prior rule? And so on. Perhaps I could say I did not "know" the rule first. How could I make judgments about meaning on the basis of a rule that I do not know?

This kind of circularity is intrinsic to the presuppositionalist system, and again, John Frame freely admits it. If I set up a proposition of language as an axiom, that axiom will be made of words. What is the meaning of those words, and how do I know I have the right meaning? If I say I know their meaning because of my axiom, I have argued in a circle.

To illustrate, suppose I ask, "How do I know God exists?" A presuppositionalist could answer, "Because I presuppose He does." Then I could ask, "What do I mean by 'God'? What God have I presupposed to exist?" The answer would be, "The God of the Bible." Then one can ask, "What if I have a faulty copy of the Bible, or a faulty understanding of it?" A person might take comfort in saying, "God would not let me err seriously." Then I could ask, "How do I know God exists?" And so on. As soon as I get to the meanings of the words in my presuppositions, the whole thing breaks down.

Frame argues that all logical systems require circularity. This is only true of systems of logical deduction, which start with a language proposition as an axiom. Evidentialism does not involve circular reasoning because it has no axioms. This lack of circularity comes at a cost, of course– the ephemeral concept of "perfect" certainty is sacrificed, instead.

Problem 3: Arbitrariness

What if a Mormon argues that he "presupposes" the doctrine of Mormonism to be true? How could we say he is wrong? A presuppositionalist would say he is wrong because we presuppose him to be wrong. Within our world view, he seems clearly wrong, but by his own presuppositions, he seems entirely correct.

The presuppositionalist says that every non-Christian lives in logical consistency with his own presuppositions. The evidentialist, on the other hand, agrees with Francis Scha-

effer, who said, "No one can live consistently according to non-Christian presuppositions." Evidentialists would say that a certain amount of true "knowledge" forces its way through to the non-Christian, because he must deal with reality the way God made it. Therefore we can attempt to convince the non-Christian on the basis of this shared knowledge. The presuppositionalist denies the existence of any relevant shared knowledge. As Cornelius van Til said, "The Calvinist can not give reasons because he has *no point of contact* with the non-Christian."

Without this common ground to adjudicate between various presuppositions, the choice of presuppositions becomes arbitrary. This problem is seen even in the fact mentioned above, that among presuppositionalists there is no general agreement about what *the* crucial presuppositions are, which are necessary for salvation. Even worse, we must allow that we really have no argument against the world view of any non-Christian– we must merely wait for God to "zap" them into new presuppositions. At best, we can let them see their presuppositions and hope they suddenly dislike what they see. If they like them, then we have nothing more to say! [3]

Existentialism and Presuppositionalism

Part of the appeal of presuppositionalism can be traced to the tremendous respect gained by C. van Til and J. Gresham Machen when they stood up to the onslaught of liberalism in the Presbyterian church in the first half of this century. Cornelius van Til's approach was to *presuppose* the fundamentals of the faith. In this way, he "protected" the articles of faith at a time when all the "evidence" seemed to point against the validity of the Bible. Would an evidentialist have stood up so well when "science" seemed to strip away all support?

Historians have paid very little attention to the influence of the "existentialist" school on the thinking of van Til, but this influence can not be denied. To understand what existentialism is, I must give a brief summary of the history of philosophy.

In Renaissance Europe, Aquinas and Descartes had tremendous impact on all culture by apparently proving the existence of God and other fundamentals of the faith in the "mathematical/logical" sense discussed above. The "Christian rationalism" represented by these two led to utter confidence in the supremacy of logic in matters of faith. The euphoria only lasted a century or so, however, because nonbelieving intellectuals, most notably David Hume in the 17th century, began to point out holes in their apparently irrefutable arguments. As C.S. Lewis and, more recently, Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, have pointed out, the arguments of Aquinas and Descartes were very good and still rank among the best. They do

not, however, seal out any possibility of counter-argument. This is primarily because they all rely on concepts from our sense experience (e.g. time and space) and no deductive proof can be given for sense experience.

Immanuel Kant set out to respond to Hume and establish Christian orthodoxy once again. He conceded Hume's criticisms and proceeded to argue for Christian principles as "moral absolutes," independent of the existence of God. God's existence became a kind of philosophical ideal, rather than a historical reality.

The revolutionary impact of this was to convey to nearly everyone the idea that is still with us, that "no one can prove the existence of God." This is proof in the "mathematical" sense, of course. Philosophers in the 18th and 19th century did not accept legal or empirical proof as proof at all. Thus, the existence of God was seen as "uncertain," though it previously had been seen as certain.

In the mid-19th century, Soren Kierkegaard also sent out a call for a return to Christian orthodoxy in Europe. He argued that one must make an "existential leap" into Christian belief– that any argument for Christianity is demeaning, like a lover giving arguments why he loves.

Later philosophers were influenced by Kierkegaard, but found they could make a "leap" into other belief systems besides Christianity. Nietzsche and Heidegger, in particular, argued that one could just as easily make the existential choice to be a "superman," or "free man"– to

define one's own morality independently. This school, called "existentialism," has dominated intellectual thought in the 20th century.

In the first half of this century, Christianity was under attack in the U.S. from nearly every quarter. Scientists claimed they had disproved essential teachings of the Bible, theologians inside the church claimed higher criticism had proved that the Bible was inconsistent, psychologists claimed the biblical view of man and morality was hopelessly outdated, adherents of other religions were increasing in the U.S., and so on. Most of the Christian church capitulated to redefining Christianity as a nice moral system with nice ceremonies, quite in line with modern thinking, not opposed to other religions, and not needing the Bible. Van Til and Machen stood against this.

Van Til essentially took up where Kierkegaard left off. Anyone who doubts this should read Kierkegaard's The Sickness Unto Death. Van Til could easily have written this book. Like Kierkegaard, he said, "The Christian can not give reasons." He did not see belief as a matter of bare *choice*, but still, he agreed with Kierkegaard that one need only be concerned with self consistency *after* deciding what one's fundamental presuppositions are. Existentialism formed the climate in which van Til operated– he addresses this system at great length in his book, A Christian Theory of Knowledge. Van Til *responded* to existentialism by saying that the existential presupposition of orthodoxy was just as valid as other systems. But he still assumed many of the basic tenets of existentialism, including (1) the Platonic definition

of knowledge as fact plus "norm," (2) the Greek definition of "proof" as logical deduction, and the rejection of inductive proof, (3) the view of all knowledge as "subjective," i.e., that no "common knowledge" exists between people of different world views, and (4) the belief that many different sets of axioms can form coherent world views.

Van Til was quite prepared to accept the prevalent idea of his day, that a completely self-consistent non-Christian world view was possible. In a way, his writings have the feel of a person beaten down by non-Christian arguments– a person on the "defense." He accepted the arguments of Hume and Kant that all of the theistic "proofs" were invalid, and he conceded that science might one day explain away all the miracles of the Bible and anything else which seemed to point to God. He said, "We must allow that it is quite possible that at some future date all the miracles recorded in Bible, not excluding the resurrection of Christ, may be explained by natural laws." He even seems to have given credence to claims that the Bible contradicts itself, saying, "All teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory." His presuppositionalism "protected" Christianity by removing its foundation from the realm of experience and reason altogether.

There was no strong evidentialist voice at that time. C.S. Lewis, in the 1940's, was one of the first to resurrect the idea of argumentation on the basis of evidence. He was not a particularly strong voice for the inspiration of the Bible, however.

In the latter half of this century, Christianity has seen an intellectual rebirth, even while

the number of nominal church attendees in Europe and North America has decreased. The excesses of science seen in the Nazi regime and in environmental disasters have led to less confidence in science as the ultimate arbiter of truth. Non-Christian scientists and authors have questioned the paradigm of evolution. The disaster of the "new morality" both in the U.S. and in the communist nations has led many to look for moral absolutes. Numerous Christians now claim impressive academic credentials and hold their own in debate with atheists. In a way, it is easy to be an evidentialist.

What if we lived in an earlier era, however, when all science seemed arrayed against Christianity? What should an orthodox evidentialist have done, if not simply "presuppose" Christianity? Would evidentialists all have said, "You're right, the Bible is wrong!

There are two things every person should do when faced with challenging evidence. First, one should have a healthy doubt about new claims, which takes into account the presuppositions of the person bringing the message. If a salesman with an interest in selling me a product shows me an impressive array of statistics, I should still hold out some doubt. Similarly, if people with an interest in becoming a new elite or with an interest in discarding "old fashioned" claims of morality tell me "science has proven...," I should take it with a grain of salt.

Second, one should hold onto "internal" evidence, i.e., "gut feelings." This is valid evidence! For instance, suppose someone tells me my wife has committed adultery, and

presents an impressive list of corroborating facts and witnesses. Still, I may say, "I know her, and I know she would not do that!" No Christian should feel ashamed to say, "I know God, and I know His Word!"

Still, once has to leave open the possibility that one has been deceived. As Francis Schaeffer said, "The Christian must have the integrity to live open to the question as to the possibility of his being 'taken in' by his Christian commitment." One must ask, "What level of evidence ought to convince a Mormon to forsake his faith? Am I honest enough to admit error on the basis of the same type of evidence?" This is an uncomfortable idea for many Christians. Yet a person who "knows" his wife would not commit adultery has no fear of the facts. The person who loudly rejects any examination of the facts is usually the one that fears that, indeed, they may point to a truth he does not want to believe!

One thing Christians ought *not* to have done was to have taken hold of a few scientists of dubious credentials who claimed to have "proven" Christianity, trumpeted their findings as the final word, and mocked all scientists who disagreed as part of an international "conspiracy" to hide evidence. In fact, much "creation science" in this century has taken exactly this form. Evidentialism has taken a beating from numerous apologists who had to retract dramatic "evidence" after loudly proclaiming it the definitive proof of Christianity. In doing so, they ignored good rules of "lawcourt" reasoning. A person who says what you want to hear is not necessarily a trustworthy witness! Sometimes we must simply say certain things

appear contradictory and leave it at that. This is not irrational if we have other strong evidence for believing something.

Calvin and the Westminster Assembly– Presuppositionalists?

In the Presbyterian and Reformed churches, the opinions of the Reformers, especially John Calvin and the members of the Westminster Assembly, have significant sway. Indeed, conservative Presbyterianism is defined by the words of the Westminster confession. Were all those Reformers dyed-in-the-wool presuppositionalists?

Some have painted this picture because of the way both Calvin and the Westminster confession diminish the importance of "external" evidences, even though they strongly affirm that these are valid, strong evidence (and use the word "evidence".)

What does the Confession place at a higher position than these? A presupposition? Here are the words of the Confession:

> "Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts."

The highest form of persuasion comes from an "inward witness." Witness– a "lawcourt" term! The Reformers speak of inward evidence, not inward presuppositions. The picture is

that of the believer "perceiving" the things of God, "hearing" His voice, etc. I know God exists in the same way I know that a tree is green– I see it as plain as day.

This fact is more important when one remembers that axiomatic, logical reasoning was not foreign to the authors of the Confession. Aquinas and others had developed this kind of reasoning to an art form centuries before the Reformation and Catholics used it heavily.

How might a presuppositionalist have written this passage of the Confession? "Our belief in the Bible is not open to debate, because we presuppose it." Is that far from the way many presuppositionalists argue today?

By pointing to an "inward witness" instead of a logical presupposition, the authors of the Confession left open the possibility for a counterargument on the basis of evidence. In the tradition of Freud, non-Christians can argue that this "internal evidence" is merely self deception and wish fulfillment. The evidentialist presents a counterargument, that atheism is wish fulfillment and belief in God is actually contrary to our nature (see, e.g. , R.C. Sproul's The Psychology of Atheism.) He agrees, however, that it is a valid subject of debate. The presuppositionalist removes it from the realm of debate altogether, by converting "witness" to "assumption." Instead of *perceiving* the things of God, the Christian *assumes* them, in the presuppositionalist view. This is not the view of the Westminster Confession.

What about Calvin? Cornelius van Til seriously misrepresents Calvin when he quotes Calvin in the Institutes as saying, "Man can not know himself without first knowing God." In

the preceding section, Calvin says, "Man can not know God without first knowing himself!" What does Calvin mean by this apparent contradiction? On the first page of his book he says, "Which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern." He waits until his Book 3, "The way in which we receive the grace of Christ," to elaborate. There, he says, (III.2.1-2) "Faith rests not on ignorance, but on knowledge," "It is not enough for a man implicitly to believe what he does not understand or even investigate," and "Augustine has spoken finely on this matter: in discussing the goal of faith, he teaches that we must know our destination and the way to it." Calvin clearly agreed with Augustine that *knowledge precedes faith.* Calvin's views on "precursors to faith" (Institutes III.2.5) are quoted below.

The above passage of the Westminster Confession, as well as the similar passages in Calvin's Institutes, do point out the need to remember that "external" evidence does not supersede "internal" perceptions of the heart. Reformed evidentialists see things like astronomy and archaeological digs as *supporting* evidence of great value, as the Confession says, but agree that without the confirming testimony of our hearts, these amount to little.

What Does the Bible Say?

The final word rests with the Bible, of course. What picture does the Bible give of knowledge? Does the Bible tell us to find the axiomatic certainty of presuppositionalism?

First of all, faith in the Bible is very often portrayed as coming about due to *convincing.*
The picture is given of "reasons" (Acts 17:2,17) which could be "examined," (Acts 17:11)
with people being "persuaded" (Acts 18:4, 2 Cor 5:11) and "convinced" (Acts 19:26, 28:24,
1 Cor 14:24, 2 Tim 3:14) by "proofs," (Acts 1:3) "witnesses," (Acts 1:8, 1 Peter 1:16-18)
"testimony," (John 5:31, 36, 39, 21:24, Hebrews 2:4, 1 John 1:2) and "signs." (John 3:2,
20:30) All of these terms indicate a weighing of evidence, not an axiomatic assumption. As
in the New Testament the evidence centers around the works of Christ, in the Old Testament
believers were reminded of the testimony of the signs, or evidences, of God's work in the
Exodus (E.g. Deut 6:22, Psalms 78:43, 108:27).

Second, faith in the Bible is spoken of as a quantity which people can have *more or less*
of– there are degrees of certainty. Jesus called people's faith "great" (Matthew 8:10, 15:28)
or "little." (Matthew 6:30, 8:26, 14:31) The apostles talked of faith as something which could
"increase" (Luke 17:5) and "grow." (2 Thess 1:3) People could become "more certain." (2
Peter 1:19) If faith means absolute certainty, how could it become greater? "Doubt", or
wavering in faith, is frequently spoken of (Matthew 14:31, Luke 24:38, John 20:27, Jude
:22). In pragmatic terms, Christians do doubt. Should we tell them that they have no faith
at all, then, that they are not Christians if they are not perfectly sure? Or should we tell
them that they are not really doubting after all? A recent book edited by R.C. Sproul,
Doubt and Assurance, deals sensitively with the issue of Christian doubts, summarized well

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by Os Guinness' statement, "There is no believing without doubting."

Faith in the Bible is essentially a passive process– we are convinced by strong evidence. Many people rebel against this picture– as Aquinas said, "Where then is the virtue of faith?" The Bible answers, as Calvinists affirm, that there is none. Faith is something God does to us in order to save us, not something we do to save ourselves (Ephesians 2:8). Although presuppositionalists agree, they still seem to favor a view of faith as an irrational, or "non-rational" process, as though being convinced by reason and the senses is somehow not virtuous enough for the elect.

The "proof text" of many presuppositionalists is Proverbs 1:7, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." It is impossible to argue from the Hebrew, however, that the word translated "beginning" here means "prerequisite;" i.e., that this verse implies that fear of the Lord must precede any knowledge. The word translated "beginning" can be equally well translated as "the first fruits," "the main thing," or "the most excellent thing." In other words, this verse, in the context of Proverbs, says that the fear of the Lord is the highest goal of wisdom; that philosophy is not properly studied without reference to God.

Non-confessing Seekers?

Perhaps the strongest argument for presuppositionalism is the following: For a person to honestly admit the evidence for God's demands, he must have at least a small degree of openness to the idea. But the Bible says that "no one seeks God," – in fact, people run from God apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. Far from openness to God, the unsaved block Him out.

To argue with a non-Christian at all, one must believe there is at least a possibility that he may be honest about the evidence. The evidentialist agrees that the Holy Spirit must do a work in a person's heart in order to allow this degree of openness. But if the Holy Spirit is already at work in a person heart to that degree, is that person not already a believer? The evidentialist seems to require the odd concept of a "Spirit-led non-Christian."

Calvinist evidentialists have no problem with this idea, because they hold that certain people are "elect" even from before their birth. At some point in their lives, God changes their hearts to see Him and hear His voice. There is no proposition of language which is a prerequisite confession before this can happen. Indeed, to require this would be to say that people of low intelligence, people with unformed language, can not be saved!

The Bible clearly states that the *implications* of faith for people who can speak and act are (1) confession of Christ as Lord, and (2) repentance. We ought not call anyone a

Christian who refuses either. But Calvinists affirm that certain people may be saved, i.e., have the Holy Spirit at work in their heart, and yet go through a time of lack of repentance, and also a time of doubt. While the Church often sets these outside the circle of fellowship, it recognizes that they may be elect. Church discipline for unrepentant members is based on the assumption that they may indeed have the Spirit and feel guilt, leading to repentance. In the same way, discussion of evidence with non-believers assumes that they may already have the Spirit and be convicted by the truth.

The conversion of Cornelius provides an example of this. As recorded in the 10th chapter of Acts, Cornelius was visited by an angel, who directed him to send for Peter. When Peter came and shared the gospel, Cornelius and all those with him became believers. Yet before this had happened, the Bible says Cornelius was "devout" and "feared God." Some might say this refers to mere nominal lip service to God. Yet the angel said to Cornelius, in Acts 10:4, that his prayers were an *acceptable sacrifice* to God, even before he had met Peter! There is no question that Cornelius truly did good in the eyes of God, and therefore must already have been moved by the Holy Spirit, before he was a Christian. Some may say, then, that Cornelius was a proper "Old Testament" believer, with the proper presuppositions and confession for that time. But Cornelius had not converted to Judaism– he remained a Gentile. His confession was not acceptable under the Old Covenant– although he believed some of what was true (e.g., he feared "God,") he would not have been called a "believer"

by any Jew. Yet when he met Cornelius, Peter affirmed that Cornelius was already accepted by God (Acts 10:35). He went on to give the *evidence* and *testimony* that the message of the Gospel (which Cornelius had apparently heard of, but not given credence to) was indeed true. Because of Peter's confidence that Cornelius was moved by the Holy Spirit, there was no question whether Cornelius would accept the message.

It is bending the passage to argue that Cornelius was not "really" acceptable to God before he affirmed the message of Peter, or to argue that he "really" had proper presuppositions all along, and just didn't know it. This passage clearly shows a person led by the Holy Spirit learning truth in degrees, starting with improper presuppositions. Evidentialists believe God works this way in many people's lives.

Calvin uses the court official (John 4:50-53), the Samaritans (John 4:42), and others in the Gospel of John as examples of people who had a knowledge which was the "preparation" of faith, or "implicit" faith, yet had not yet confessed Christ as Lord (Institutes III.2.5). He says, "From these passages it is clear that even those who are not imbued with the first elements [of faith] *but are still inclined to hearken* are called 'believers'; not in an exact sense, indeed, but in so far as God in His kindness deigns to grace that pious affection with great honor. But this teachableness, with the desire to learn, is far different from sheer ignorance in which those sluggishly rest who are content...." These people, like Cornelius, are called believers, "*although they had not been imbued with even a trace of the gospel teaching.*"

Conclusion

Is it not too early to create a new orthodoxy, or "doctrine of the justification of knowledge"? The presuppositionalist system is new in terms in church history– it arose only in this century, in response to a new atheist system, existentialism. Presuppositionalists deny the charge of novelty, of course– they argue that their system is "implicit" in the Scriptures. It is not beside the point, however, to ask where the word "presupposition," (or "axiom," or whatever) appears in the Scriptures. This concept was not alien to the writers of the New Testament! Greek logic was well known to Paul, and he could easily have expressed this thought in the language of his day. Instead, Paul rejects Greek thinking. The passage of 1 Corinthians 1:20-2:16 is Paul's extended rejection of Greek wisdom. He does not say, "Our presuppositions are different from theirs." Instead, he preaches the *testimony* of Christ's crucifixion, the *demonstration* of the Spirit's power, and the internal spiritual *discernment* (a "legal" term in Greek, referring to examination and scrutiny) by the believer. It is also not beside the point to ask whether the Bible endorses the restricted, Platonic definition of "knowledge" favored by presuppositionalists. Jesus, in Luke 11:13, says, "You, being evil, *know* how to give good gifts." Evil people have true knowledge of at least something, according to Jesus! In Luke 18:20, he says, "You *know* the commandments," to an unrepentant young man. Here, an evil person has true knowledge of the Bible itself. In place after place, the Bible

uses the "common" definition for knowledge. Incorrect presuppositions (e.g., being evil) do not invalidate that knowledge.

Many issues remain which this essay has not addressed. I hope that in this essay I have succeeded, at least, in showing that evidentialism is not naive, un-"Reformed," or, worse, heretical. Creating a new orthodoxy, or "doctrine," of epistemology, is premature, and discussion of these things must continue in Christian charity.

References

[1] van Til, Geisler, and Frame all take the impossibility of "neutrality" as the death knell of evidentialism and the inductive method. In doing so, they seem to assume that honesty is impossible– that no one ever drops a belief he wants to hold when confronted with evidence to the contrary. While it is true that dishonesty, or "denial" (belief despite all the facts to the contrary), exists, people can be honest sometimes! The possibility of a *non-Christian* having such honesty is discussed in the last section of this essay.

[2] I have elsewhere (Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith **47**, March 1995) addressed the question of whether absolute certainty is possible.

[3] John Frame says the conversation can continue without agreement on presuppositions,

but can not follow a reasoning process. In Apologetics to the Glory of God, he says, "So when the unbeliever says 'I can't accept your presuppositions,' we reply, 'Well, let's talk some more and maybe they will become more attractive to you!"

Presuppositionalists always seem to waver between the clear declaration of van Til (and apparently clear implication of presuppositionalism) that "the Christian cannot give reasons," and the declaration of the Bible, "Always be ready to give a reason for the hope within you." John Frame is no exception. In his book, Apologetics to the Glory of God, Frame says we can give arguments *for* our beliefs, all the while *presupposing* them.

While admitting that this is circular argument, Frame insists that everyone must use circular arguments, and comes up with an illustration to try to show that arguing on the basis of only our own presuppositions follows "common sense." In his example, a person trying to have a discussion with a crazy person does not adopt a crazy man's assumptions (e.g. that everyone is trying to kill him).

Does this illustration prove Frame's point? In his example, he supposes that we would discuss with the crazy man the *evidence* that no one is really trying to kill him, etc. For Frame, this use of sense experience follows from Christian presuppositions (of the existence of God, the resurrection of Christ, etc.) but Frame does not propose bringing up these presuppositions to the crazy man. The discussion involves only shared *sense*

experience. Frame feels compelled to "justify" the validity of knowledge from the senses, but like the evidentialist, he feels no need to justify this knowledge *in advance* to the unbeliever– he allows for "common knowledge."

In this example and elsewhere Frame argues that Christian presuppositions (e.g. belief in the resurrection of Christ) are "implicit" in any use of sense experience. Bahnsen's arguments are similar. In this view everyone, including the non-Christian, must "really" assume Christian beliefs in order to believe any sense experience. This is nonsense! Clearly an unbeliever does not verbally or consciously presuppose Christian doctrine. Frame seems to argue that because belief in the reliability of the senses "follows" from Christianity, then Christianity must be affirmed as true by anyone who believes the senses. This is a logical fallacy. If A implies B, the truth of B does not imply A. If Frame means that only Christianity provides a world view in which sense experience has meaning, this is clearly wrong, since many non-Christians believe their sense experiences, for reasons other than belief in God.

The "common sense" in Frame's example of a discussion with a crazy man seems to really be the evidentialist belief– that sense experience is valid knowledge and a valid starting point for all people, independent of their assumptions.