

Some Brief Critical Thoughts on Presuppositionalism¹

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The Legacy of Cornelius Van Til

Presuppositionalism was pioneered in America by Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.² Cornelius Van Til emigrated with his family from the Netherlands as a child. He grew up in the Christian Reformed Church that was

¹ This paper, modified somewhat, is excerpted from chapter three "Objections to Theistic Arguments in General" of my doctoral dissertation *A Defense of Thomas Aquinas' Second Way* at the University of Arkansas.

² Relevant works by Van Til include: *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (London: Tyndal Press, 1950) republished (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1953); *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1969); *In Defense of the Faith, Vol. II: A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (n.c.: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969); *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1974); *Christianity and Barthianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1974); *The New Hermeneutic* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1974); *Who Do You Say that I Am?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1975); *In Defense of the Faith, Vol. VI Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1976); *The Defense of the Faith* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1979); *Why I Believe in God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, n.d.); *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2003).

For an analysis and/or defense of Van Til's thought by his disciples see: Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1998); *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Texarkana, AR: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996); John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995); "Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985): 279-299 [a response to the Sproul, Gerstner and Lindsley book cited below]; William White, Jr., *Van Til: Defender of the Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979); Rousas Rushdoony, *Van Til in the Modern Thinkers Series: An International Library of Philosophy and Theology*, David H. Freeman, ed. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1974). Other Presuppositionalist thinkers who might differ somewhat from Van Til but nevertheless acknowledge their debt to him include John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987); Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978); *The Biblical Philosophy of History* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1977); and Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, n.d.); *Escape from Reason* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968); *He Is There and He Is not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndal House Publisher, 1972). These three works of Schaeffer are reprinted in *The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer: A Christian Worldview vol.1 A Christian View of Philosophy and Culture* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982).

For criticisms of Van Til see: R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense of the Christian Faith and a Critique of Presuppositional Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984); John W. Robbins, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth* (Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1986); Norman L. Geisler, s.v., "Van Til, Cornelius" in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 751-758.

For critical discussions of Van Til together with his responses see: E. R. Geehan, ed. *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1971).

For an interesting interplay between various views on Christian apologetics, including Presuppositional and the Classical approaches, see Steven B. Cowan, ed. *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000).

heavily influenced by the Dutch Calvinist theologian and Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper is often credited with founding the presuppositional system that Van Til developed and made famous in America.

Van Til studied at Calvin College and Calvin Seminary as well as Princeton Theological Seminary and Princeton University. In addition to several pastorates, Van Til taught apologetics at Princeton Seminary for a year before he and three other faculty members tendered their resignations over the issue of theological liberalism at Princeton. The other three faculty members founded Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 1929 very soon after leaving Princeton and asked Van Til to join them that year. He taught at Westminster until his retirement in 1975 at the age of eighty.³

The Presuppositionalism of Cornelius Van Til

In Van Til's estimation, the methodology of Presuppositionalism was necessitated by Calvinist theology, particularly the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and the total depravity of the human race. Van Til argued that to assume an intellectual common ground between the believer and unbeliever from which the believer could launch into a rational argument for God's

³ See, Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), s.v., "Van Til, Cornelius," 1211 and the William White work cited in note 2. The legacy of Van Til endures primarily in the reformed camp of Christian evangelicalism. Van Til's influence in the twentieth century marked a shift from the standard methodology of apologetics that had dominated conservative reformed thought in America in the previous century by the old Princeton Theological Seminary. The "Princeton School" was comprised of such theologians as Archibald Alexander (1772-1851) who was the first professor of Princeton Theological Seminary and the progenitor of the "Princeton Theology," Charles Hodge (1779-1878) who was next in the theology chair at Princeton Theological Seminary and was considered the most influential American Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century, his son Archibald Alexander Hodge (1823-1886) and most notably Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (1851-1921) who came to fully define the proto-Evidentialism or Scottish Common Sense Philosophy of the day. In the reformed camp Van Til is most readily contrasted to the polemical theology of Warfield. Van Til's legacy was being carried on by his most orthodox disciple, Greg L. Bahnsen (see note 1) until his untimely death in 1995. Bahnsen's material is still widely read within the Presuppositionalist camp.

existence, is *de facto* to deny the God of Christianity.⁴ He argued that the God of Christianity (which he deems the only God) must be presupposed to exist before there could be any coherent or rational thought in the first place. In his view, the unbeliever's attempt to argue against the existence of the Christian God already employs epistemological assumptions that can be the case only if the God of Christianity exists.

Thus, for Van Til, Christians who use the Classical theistic arguments are already compromising the nature of the very God they are trying to prove. Van Til remarks:

This is, in the last analysis, the question as to what are one's ultimate presuppositions. When man became a sinner he made of himself instead of God the ultimate or final reference point. And it is precisely this presupposition, as it controls without exception all forms of non-Christian philosophy, that must be brought into question. . . . In not challenging this basic presupposition with respect to himself as the final reference point in predication the natural man may accept the "theistic proofs" as fully valid. He may construct such proofs. He has constructed such proofs. *But the god whose existence he proves to himself in this way is always a god who is something other than the self-contained ontological trinity of Scripture.*⁵

This is not to say that Van Til denied any obligation to engage the nonbeliever in dialogue. Nor would his engagement with the nonbeliever consist of merely proclaiming the Christian gospel. For the Presuppositionalist, the truth of the Christian world view is demonstrated by a transcendental argument in terms of which a rather full-blown Trinitarian Christian theism is the necessary prerequisite for any rational thought at all. Van Til asserts, "The only 'proof' of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility

⁴ While it is true that Van Til uses the term 'common ground,' (see, for example "My Credo" C. 2. in *Jerusalem and Athens*, 21) he distinguishes 'common ground' from 'common notion;' the former being the "fact" that must be presupposed, viz., that humans are what the Bible says they are, and the latter (which he rejects) being any kind of intellectual or cognitive commonality between the believer and nonbeliever.

⁵ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 77, emphasis added.

of 'proving' anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of 'proof' itself."⁶ In his *Why I Believe in God*, he comments:

Often enough we [who believe in God] have talked with you [who do not believe in God] about facts and sound reasons as though we agreed with you on what these really are. In our arguments for the existence of God we have frequently assumed that you and we together have an area of knowledge on which we agree. But we really do not grant that you see any fact in any dimension of life truly. We really think you have colored glasses on your nose when you talk about chickens and cows, as well as when you talk about the life hereafter."⁷

In a debate with the Classical Christian apologist R. C. Sproul, Presuppositionalist Greg Bahnsen, arguably Van Til's most ardent defender, claimed that even the laws of logic do not yield the certainty that Sproul thinks.⁸ Sproul maintained that the only place where one can have absolute philosophical certainty is in the formal realm with the laws of logic.⁹ In making this point, Sproul was more or less conceding to Bahnsen that the Classical model does not yield absolute certainty in its conclusions about the existence of God since the Classical *a posteriori* arguments to that end have an element of induction in them. Bahnsen retorted that the Classical model does not even have the certainty that Sproul thinks. He argued:

[Sproul] says that certainty only applies to deductive certainty I'd like to say it doesn't even apply to that. ... There are two reasons why First of all, if this [syllogism] is certain, it must be an application of the law of Modus Ponens. That's a basic law of logic. ... Even in low level cases ... the question arises even for logicians 'Are you applying your formal laws?' You can be mistaken in identifying a case of Modus Ponens. ... Secondly, there's this question. 'Why is the law of Modus Ponens to be accepted?' How

⁶ Van Til, *Jerusalem and Athens*, 21.

⁷ Van Til, *Why I Believe in God*, 9.

⁸ The debate between Greg L. Bahnsen and R. C. Sproul took place at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, MS in 1980. The audio file is available from <http://www.wordmp3.com>.

⁹ Sproul used as an example of a deductive argument "All men are mortal. Socrates is a man. Therefore, Socrates is mortal."

do you know that Modus Ponens is a valid form of argumentation? Even Modus Ponens can't be argued for without Modus Ponens.¹⁰

Bahnsen makes two points about Sproul's argument. First, Bahnsen argues that one can never be sure whether one has adequately or correctly employed Modus Ponens in one's own argument. Second, he argues that one can never be sure that the law of Modus Ponens is even valid in the first place. With this, then, where in Bahnsen's estimation does any certainty come from? For him, even our confidence in the laws of logic themselves is only possible if one presupposes the Christian world view. Thus, the Presuppositionalist tries to show the nonbeliever that the rationality that supposedly gives rise to his unbelief is only possible because the Christian God exists. In this way, the Presuppositionalist tries to get the nonbeliever to see that his unbelief is impossible to rationally maintain.

Responses to Presuppositionalism

In response several things might be said. First, much of the argument that Van Til and Bahnsen make seems more fitting as a transcendental argument for the necessity and unavailability of logic itself rather than a transcendental argument for the necessity and unavailability of Trinitarian theism. No one could argue that logic is not the case, since, in order to make the argument that logic is not the case (or that logic does not apply to reality) the arguer would have to use logic. This is so because acknowledging the difference between "being the case" and "not being the case" demonstrates the antecedent truth and unavailability of the logical law of non-contradiction. If the law of non-contradiction is not so, then there could be no distinction between "being the case" and "not being the case." Since logic is necessary even to

¹⁰ Sproul-Bahnsen debate. Though Sproul's example is an AAA-1 Categorical Syllogism, in the ensuing discussion using Sproul's example Bahnsen talks instead in terms of the truth-functional law of Modus Ponens. It seems that what Bahnsen had in mind is that, concerning the syllogism, if the premises were true, then the conclusion is necessarily true ($p \supset q$, $p \therefore q$), which, of course, is an example of Modus Ponens.

argue against logic itself, this shows that logic is transcendentally necessary. But somehow, Van Til thinks that this is the case with a full-blown Trinitarian Christian theism. While it is clear to me how *logic* is transcendentally necessary for there to be an argument against God, it is not clear to me how *God* is transcendentally necessary for an argument against God. In fact, though Van Til throughout his writings repeatedly asserts that one must presuppose the God of Christian theism before he can know anything else, I have yet to encounter one instance where Van Til or Bahnsen actually make this argument.

What the Presuppositionalist has confused here is the difference between the order of knowing and the order of being; or, if you will, the difference between a certain metaphysical consideration and a certain epistemological consideration. Take as an example the illustration of a map to Atlanta.¹¹ In the order of being, there would have to *be* the city of Atlanta before there could be a map showing one how to get to Atlanta. Thus, in the order of being, Atlanta is first. However, in order to find one's way to Atlanta, one might need a map. Thus, in the order of knowing, the map is first. In the theistic argument debate, the theist certainly sees that in the order of being God is first, since, if God is the creator of all things besides Himself, then, if there was not a God, there would be nothing else at all, not even an argument for God.¹² But in the order of knowing, it might be the case that one would need a "map" to God, i.e., a theistic argument. Just as using a map to find Atlanta says nothing amiss about the metaphysical priority of Atlanta to the map, likewise, to use a theistic argument to find God says nothing amiss about the metaphysical priority of God to the argument. The Presuppositionalist is wrong to think that

¹¹ I am indebted to J. P. Moreland for this map illustration, *mutatis mutandis*.

¹² This is perhaps a tricky statement. Certain theists of a Platonic persuasion might argue that abstract objects exist in their own right apart from any creative act on the part of God and thus, might exist even if God did not. For a critique of this form of Platonic theism and its contrast with a more Thomistic version see: Stephen Montague Puryear, *On the Compatibility of Contemporary Platonism and the Classical Theistic View of God's Relationship to the World* (Master's Thesis, Southern Evangelical Seminary, 1998).

if an argument leads on to a belief in the existence of God, this God could not be the God of Christianity. He is wrong in thinking that this would make God subservient to the argument. The fact that the argument for God's existence comes first means that it only does so in the order of knowing. It does not imply that somehow the being of God is secondary. Presuppositionalists mistakenly assume that to have the argument first in the order of knowing is to tacitly deny that God is first in the order of being. It does not.

Second, the Presuppositionalist seems to confuse knowing something *truly* and knowing something *exhaustively*. He seems to think that unless the nonbeliever correctly links the elements of his knowledge of the world to the Creator of those elements, he has not understood any of those elements at all. This seems to me to be clearly false. Surely, one who disbelieves in the existence of God can still have some degree of truth. An atheist can learn agriculture (to use Van Til's example) as well, if not better in some cases, than the theist. In fact, Van Til's point seems to prove too much. Even he himself would have to admit that the theist does not exhaustively know certain elements of his world. Van Til would have to admit that no human is omniscient. Thus, if the theist lacks a certain degree of knowledge, then it would seem that the difference between the atheist and theist is merely a matter of degree. But if it is only a matter of degree, then Van Til's system breaks down and those principles in his system that would militate against the legitimacy of the theistic arguments no longer hold.

Third, even if one granted that the Presuppositionalist was right in claiming that human beings are estranged from God by virtue of mankind's rebellion against God, it does not follow from this that human beings are totally estranged from *reality itself*. Surely even the most extreme Calvinist or Presuppositionalist would admit that gravity still affects the sinner as much as the saint. It is from this common ground of reality that the Classical tradition has built its

natural theology. Van Til seems to miss that fact that the nonbeliever participates within reality and that his reference to reality itself could serve as a starting point to find God. Indeed, some might argue that it is the Classical tradition that is more God honoring, since it refuses to acknowledge that there is any aspect of reality that does not rightly point to God as its creator or that fails to do so perspicuously. For Van Til to summarily reject rational argument as a viable source to discover God seems tacitly to say that there is a part of reality, viz., human reason that is independent of God.

Last, and perhaps most serious, while Bahnsen asserts that the laws of logic can be known to be valid only if one presupposes the Christian world view, he goes on to use the laws of logic in his attempt to demonstrate that this is the case. Throughout his debate with Sproul, as well as throughout out his writings, Bahnsen utilizes a stock phrase that he gleaned from Van Til. He encapsulates the Presuppositionalist approach by saying that Christianity can be shown to be true by demonstrating the "impossibility of the contrary." But there are several things wrong with this line of reasoning vis-à-vis the Presuppositionalist/Classical debate. First, taken at face value, Bahnsen's logic does not work. In standard categorical logic, while contraries cannot both be true, they can both be false. Because of this, proving a contrary to be false does not show the truth of the proposition to which is it the contrary. Perhaps a more charitable reading might take him to mean "demonstrating the impossibility of *every* contrary." In this case, one might argue that the sum total of all the contraries to a proposition amounts to that proposition's contradictory. It then follows that if a contradictory proposition is demonstrated to be false the proposition to which it is a contradictory is demonstrated to be true.

Second, if this is what the Presuppositionalist is saying (that Christianity can be shown to be true by demonstrating the impossibility of the *contradiction*), then another problem is that

Van Til and Bahnsen are assuming that a world view and even its contradictory cannot both be false. They are asserting that if the contradiction to Christianity can be shown to be impossible, then Christianity necessarily is true. But this could only be the case if the laws of logic hold *antecedently*. However, Bahnsen has already argued that the laws of logic cannot be known to be valid unless Christianity is presupposed. He cannot have it both ways. He cannot deny Sproul the antecedent legitimacy of logic and at the same time use logic to prove that Christianity is true by demonstrating the "impossibility of the contrary [contradiction]."

Third, it is even worse for Bahnsen. If it was not the case that logic (e.g., the law of non-contradiction) was antecedently legitimate, then there would be no difference between Christianity and non-Christianity. Indeed, there would be no differences at all. But since Bahnsen obviously knows that theism is not atheism and that anyone who denies the truths of God and His Word are affirming something that is false, then Bahnsen is tacitly acknowledging the antecedent reality of logic *before* he even engages the unbeliever.

Now the Presuppositionalist may respond by claiming that this is only the case because the God of Christianity is real. But I would not quarrel with this response. Of course it is only because God is real that anything else is real. But even Bahnsen himself admits in his debate with Sproul that he (Bahnsen) is not merely trying to make an ontological point (which is what this response amounts to) with his Presuppositionalism. Rather, he claims to be making an epistemological point. But he cannot even state his point without there already being logic in the first place since without logic there would be no difference between his point and that which was not his point. What this amounts to is that the only thing that the transcendental method gives us epistemologically is the transcendental necessity of logic, not full-blown Christian Trinitarian

theism. But to say this is not to espouse Presuppositionalism. This is no different than the position of the Classical Apologist.

For all the energy spent by those who try to champion the Presuppositionalist method, most of the discussion is wasted since very often it ends up that the Presuppositionalist uses the apologetic method of the Classical approach.¹³ William Lane Craig has rightly pointed out that sometimes the Presuppositionalist confuses a transcendental argument with the argument known as *demonstratio quia*.¹⁴ The difference is this. To reason transcendently is to show that X is necessary for very denial of X. Thus, as I have argued, logic is transcendently necessary since one could not deny logic without using logic.¹⁵ The *demonstratio quia* is a proof that leads from consequent to ground. This says that X is the grounding for Y. An example of a Presuppositionalist who confuses the two, or rather, one who mistakenly argues *demonstratio quia* while calling it transcendental, is Grover Gunn. In a discussion about morality Gunn argues

If there is no reality beyond the material world of energy and matter, then any sense of morality which we may have is nothing more but a naive [sic] fantasy and illusion. Deny God and all that remains of ethics is varying opinions and alternate lifestyles and cultural conventions. ... Deep inside every person, an alarm goes off. Something shouts out, "That's unthinkable!"¹⁶

¹³ Another confusion among Presuppositionalist is their failure to understand (or even to acknowledge) the differences between the Classical approach in apologetics and the Evidentialist approach. In short, the Classical approach sees the necessity of establishing theism before evidences can be marshaled to prove the Christian faith. A lot of points can only mean what they mean in the context of theism. Thus, for example, it is futile to try to prove to an atheist that a miracle has occurred since, if there is not God, then by definition no event can be a miracle. The naturalist will always, if he is to be consistent, interpret any event as natural, even if it is anomalous.

¹⁴ William Lane Craig, "A Classical Apologist's Response," in Cowan, ed. *Five Views*, 233.

¹⁵ In fact, I would assert that the case for logic is even stronger than merely being transcendently necessary in that no one ever fails to use logic. Thus, it is not merely the case that logic is transcendently necessary only when one tries to deny logic itself. Even if one never deliberately tries to deny logic itself, one never escapes logic.

¹⁶ Grover Gunn, "A Comparison of Apologetic Methods," available from <http://capo.org/cpc/apolo22.htm>, accessed Dec. 31, 2004.

Gunn could not have stated the argument better if he was a Classical apologist. He has framed what is known as the moral argument for the existence of God. In doing so, he has left far behind the supposed transcendental method of Presuppositionalism. Notice that morality is itself not necessary to deny morality the way logic is necessary to deny logic. Thus, morality is not transcendently necessary. He is equivocating of the notion of being "unthinkable." He is appealing to the fact that all people know that there are moral realities. He then argues that the worldview of atheism cannot account for (or ground) these known realities. This is the classic *demonstratio quia*. This is exactly the Classical apologetics method. God is the ground of the consequent of moral reality. Examples such as this redound throughout Presuppositionalist material. It is unfortunate for their position that they so explicitly repudiate the Classical approach to apologetics but when it come time to actually *do* apologetics, they can only resort to the Classical model. But I am nevertheless happy that they do so. Welcome aboard!