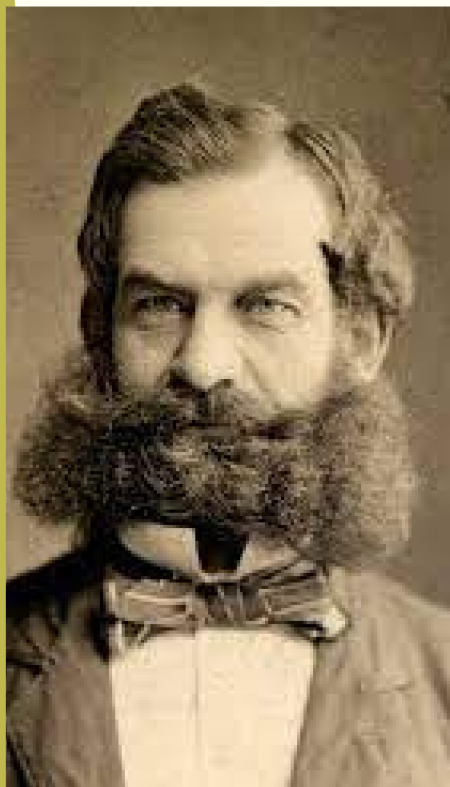


AN EBOOK BY NATURE AND GRACE

50 ERRORS OF CHRISTIAN PRESUP- POSITION ALISM



Christian
Presuppositionalists
foreswear
philosophy. But
they're actually
committed to the
most abominable
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THE REV. DR.
GORDON VAN CLARK III

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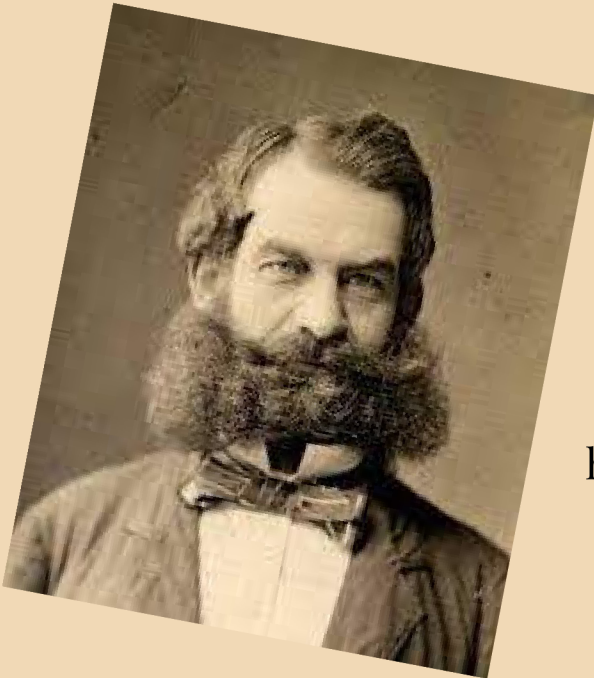
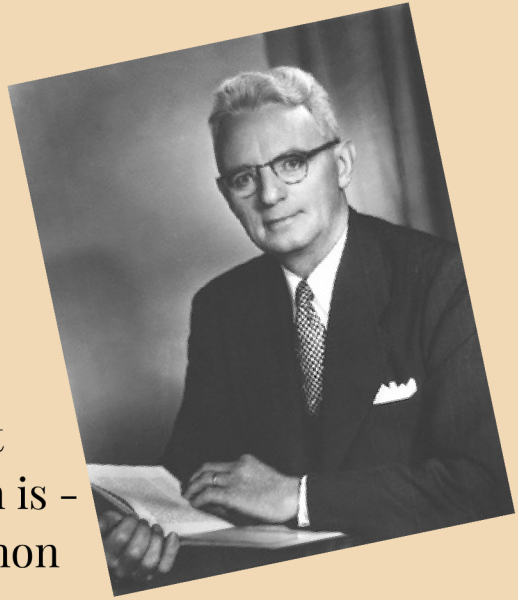
50 ERRORS
of Christian
Presuppositionalism

by

THE REV. DR. GORDON VAN CLARK III

Nature and Grace Press
2023, *Anno Domini*

“That’s not what
presuppositionalism is –
we believe in common
grace!”



"You mean,
hocus-pocus?"

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1. Philosophy	1
I. PHILOSOPHICAL POSITIONS	3
2. Occasionalism	4
3. Nominalism	7
4. Voluntarism	9
5. Skepticism	10
6. Mediation Epistemology	12
7. Wholism	14
8. Coherentism	16
9. Meaning Internalism	18
10. Pragmatism	21
11. A Priorism	23
12. The Myth of “The Given”	25
13. Positivism	28
14. Mechanism	30
15. Knowledge Externalism	31
16. Psychologism	34

Table of Contents

II. UNINTENDED ALLIES	35
17. Descartes	37
18. Hume	38
19. Kant	40
20. Hegel	42
21. Barth	43
22. Modernity	47
23. Postmodernity	50
III. THEOLOGICAL ERRORS	52
24. Fundamentalism	53
25. Pietism	55
26. Fideism	57
27. Biblicism	58
28. Mysticism	60
29. Cultishness	61
30. Hyper-Calvinism	62
31. Anabaptism	65
IV. INTELLECTUAL VICIES	67
32. Argumentum Ad Hominem	68
33. Authoritarianism	70

Table of Contents

34. Rationalism	71
35. Anti-Intellectualism	72
36. Dilettantism	74
37. Intellectual Servility	76
38. Radicalism	78
39. Hagiography	79
40. Ideology	80
41. Moralism	81
V. POLITICAL PROBLEMS	83
42. Identitarianism	84
43. Tribalism	85
44. Theocracy	86
45. Heteronomy	88
46. Illiberalism	91
47. Integralism	94
48. Utopianism	96
49. Puritanism	98
50. Bolshevism	100

Introduction

“Presuppositionalism is *the* Reformed approach to apologetics.”

“No one figured out the Reformed approach to apologetics until Cornelius Van Til, four centuries after the Calvinist Reformation.”

Mmm...right. Am I the only one who sees a problem here?

It’s about time we laid the “Reformed apologetics” canard to rest. Presuppositionalism is not only not *the* Reformed apologetic. It’s not even an *apologetic*; it’s a capitulation to the spirit

of the age on any number of points, an embrace of many of the worst of the errors it purports to criticize, and not just a craven apology for but also a retreat from witness to the public truth of the Christian religion.

I've seen Christians assume unbiblical presuppositions; it happens. Postmodern Christians do it; empiricist scientific Bible-provers do it; but wait until you see what the presuppositionalists bring to the table: So many unbiblical and incorrect philosophical presuppositions it'll make your head spin.

We should have guessed it when they told us not to think for ourselves, to extract our autonomous reason and attach an ESV Bible to our brain stem. Can they be trusted to have gotten all the answers right?

There's something very convenient about presuppositionalism: You don't have to read anyone else ever again. You already know you're right. Yet countless mischaracterizations of philosophers and misunderstandings of philosophy and theology arise when you refuse to read, with good will, those whom you do not yet understand.

While the presuppositionalists, like certain other sects, encourage us to read almost all books in order to contradict, and a few select books to believe, a great Christian philosopher once said, "Read, not to contradict nor to believe, but to weigh and consider." The Christian philosopher? Francis Bacon. The University of Chicago has chiseled those words in stone in their great reading room.

Strikingly, this approach to the intake of

ideas does not lead to heresy, but to Christian wisdom. What is more, it works for non-Christians as well! Imagine: A method of intellectual growth that works for both Christians and non-Christians. Common ground, you might say?

Now, presuppositionalism might seem like a rare duck of in the far corner of a no-name zoo. But the reader will recognize in the characterization below that presuppositionalism is simply the most concentrated form of conservative neo-evangelical Christian thought. It reveals the errors of that form of thought in a most telling and entertaining way. And many of the forms of progressive and liberal capitulation are simply the flipside of this mistaken Christian approach.

By a *via negativa*, the reader will also discern, in my critique of 50 errors of presuppositionalism, the beginnings of an

alternative and more profitable Christian and humane public intellectual approach. In a world gone astray, nothing is more pressing than proper Christian engagement with the world, engagement mind you, not retreat, nor capitulation. The Christian life is lived in the world, and all of us are living out a script constructed by one philosopher-theologian or another. Hopefully, my ramblings will go some way to flipping the script in your mind about Christian intellectual and practical life.

If not, at least you will be entertained.
Scrolle Lege!

1

Philosophy

The first error of Christian presuppositionalism is its thought that it does not engage in philosophy, but rather steps in from outside to adjudicate philosophies.

Presuppositionalism claims to be something other than a philosophy, a true Christian philosophy that is an anti-philosophy. It is correct to label it an anti-philosophy, but it is equally necessary to label it a philosophy, in that it takes a large number of controversial philosophical positions. It claims to speak about and against all philosophy, as if in doing so, it could remain above the fray.

But of course, in rejecting one philosophical position, one implicitly commits oneself to its opposite (without having the chance to find a middle way).

It is then no surprise that presuppositionalism finds itself committed to an endless list of philosophical positions, and often the ones less consonant with Christian faith, and sometimes to *both* sides of a philosophical disagreement. In rejecting every philosophical position, one finds oneself accidentally committed to every problematic philosophical position, without grounds to defend any of them.

This is philosophy, but bad philosophy. It is heteronomous philosophy; philosophy done on the basis of principles from outside philosophy. Of course, it is not only that. It is also actual philosophy, since presuppositionalists do, in fact, take controversial philosophical positions for

philosophical reasons, as one can't help but doing.

I

**PHILOSOPHICAL
POSITIONS**

2

Occasionalism

In order to insist on the theory that finite things cannot be understood in any way without appeal to the divine creator, presuppositionalists are forced into accepting occasionalism. Even if they were to think that God had revealed the truth of an Aristotelian theory of causal powers, their epistemology is incompatible with such a revelation. If things have their own legitimate powers, then they obey laws that can be understood in their own right - science and natural philosophy are legitimate. If understanding is impossible without appeal to God, then being must be impossible apart from God.

The causal connections between things must only be explicable as acts of God. The world is rendered unintelligible on its own terms. All intelligibility, because all activity, arises directly from God alone.

I should qualify this, as other of these, since presuppositionalists do not explicitly embrace the position in question. Presumably, they reject it along with all other philosophical positions. Rather, they accept the line of reasoning of these philosophers. They could nod their head to an occasionalist's reasoning, saying that it is correct given their premises, given philosophical methods. This is clearest in the case of Humeanism. Hume doesn't in fact argue that God does not exist; but he does argue that the normal arguments for God's existence don't work, and presuppositionalists imbibe that reasoning. They

nod their heads to Hume. They like philosophical positions that undermine the intelligibility of the world, or the mind's access to reality. These open up a Cartesian gap that the presuppositionalist attempts to bridge with divine revelation.

3

Nominalism

The presuppositionalist view is that things are to be understood as God directly names them. We may not look at the world and carve it at the visible joints of nature. We do not know the names of things unless God tells us. This radically destroys the knowability of the world, robbing us of a place to begin to ever understand God's word to us, which comes in the form of human life and language. The presuppositionalist insists that this ignorance is a result of sin, but if so, then the Christian should be able to do secular philosophy and simply see things as they are through the process of sanctification. Likewise, they should admit that Adam knew perfectly well

how to understand things apart from divine revelation. When they push back ignorance from after the fall to before, they reveal the ontological nature of their position.

4

Voluntarism

The presuppositionalist cannot avoid a voluntaristic view of the world, anymore than a nominalistic one. If truths of mathematics and logic are simply dependent on the will of God, then we have voluntarism. If truth about the natural world is in no way visible from the things themselves, then we must assume that it is simply imposed on created things by the divine will, rather than built into them in divine design. Again, presuppositionalists will insist that our inability is not a fault of divine creation, but only of human sin and creatureliness, but this is simply hard to believe.

5

Skepticism

Presuppositionalism embraces every skeptical argument it comes across, like the most foolish and pessimistic of philosophers. It embraces a Cartesian skepticism about knowledge of the world, even at the most basic level, that requires divine revelation for us even to know that the world exists. There are cogent arguments from the most impressive minds of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries that skepticism rests on a mistake, see Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Charles Taylor, Hubert Dreyfuss, and John McDowell. Skepticism is generally an unattractive philosophical position, a disease to be eradicated. It should not be embraced, then looking for a “skeptical solution.”

6

Mediational Epistemology

Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfuss argue that modern and contemporary epistemology, in almost all of their manifestations, are beholden to a picture, a picture of the mind's relationship to the world. On this picture, knowledge can be had only through, that is, only through experience, surface stimulation, ideas, the categories, and so on. Some mediating term comes between mind and world making knowledge possible.

Or rather, impossible. For in each case, the element introduced to mediate be-

tween mind and world becomes an insuperable obstacle. In the same way, presuppositionalism assumes that we can only know the world through a worldview, and in the best case, through the interpretive lens of special revelation. But this means that we never really know the world. We know about the world, because God tells us about it. But how do we even have a basis for understanding what God says to us?

7

Wholism

Wholism is the idea that the significance of any one belief is inseparable from every other belief a person holds. This was the position of the British Idealists, like Bradley. Bertrand Russell and other founders of analytic philosophy tore this idea apart. There is a truth in wholism; the significance of a belief, of a concept found in a belief, and so on, shifts as other beliefs change or are added. But this doesn't preclude the requisite isolation of a particular judgment by people who have wildly different beliefs. Even if we have wildly different beliefs about something, our claims about it can be understood by one another, and disagreements can be evaluated. If our

different beliefs about x changed the nature of x so drastically, we could no longer be said to be disagreeing about the nature of x . Presuppositionalism takes up this doctrine of British Idealism wholesale.

8

Coherentism

Analytic philosopher John McDowell argues that most modern philosophy oscillates between positivism (manifested by British empiricists Locke and Hume, logical positivists, and epistemological naturalist W. V. O. Quine) and coherentism (British Idealists, Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty). Presuppositionalism combines them both. On the one hand, the only external check on belief is the impingement of divine revelation. On the other hand, the only internal, subjective test of the truth of a belief is its coherence with an entire system of belief. The problem with coherentism is that it seems to lack sufficient account-

ability to reality. It doesn't seem to provide a sufficient test of belief. People are driven to it because they see it as the only alternative to a brute, interpreted given (a critique Van Til makes of empiricism). But if these are the only options, we are in a bad place. If contemporary analytic Kantians don't have to settle for this unsatisfactory complement of options, why should Christian thinkers?

9

Meaning Internalism

Meaning Internalism is the idea that what a word means in the mouth of a speaker is determined by considerations of the speaker's own thought and psychology. For example, if I am a primitive man using the word "water," I mean, the stuff I drink, that flows in rivers, that falls from the sky, etc. As a modern, scientific man, when I say "water," I mean H₂O; I know a specific chemical formula, and I refer to only a portion of what flows in rivers, falls from the sky, and of what I drink (though what I drink is closer to being H₂O. A primitive man would not have

thought such distinctions mattered. The meaning internalist says that we mean different things by our words.

The presuppositionalist accepts this. If a non-Christian says “water,” not knowing that it is created by the Triune God of the Bible who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and I say “water,” knowing all those things, we mean something different by the word.

But contemporary philosophers have made a sustained attack on this conception of word-meaning. Many of the proponents of meaning internalism are naturalistic sciency folks, etc. The contemporary externalists argue that many words mean what they do by referring to things outside the mind, about which we may disagree. The primitive man may not know that water is H₂O, but we still mean the same thing

when we speak of “water.” There is an increase of understanding, but not a change of meaning. This is crucial for establishing communication between groups of people. Here presuppositionalism adverts to postmodernism and psychologism. We are stuck inside our own heads and cannot communicate with others about an objective truth.

10

Pragmatism

Attributing to presuppositionalism pragmatism follows from coherentism, and a number of other charges. Pragmatism holds that the only test of beliefs is whether they work, and sometimes, that truth isn't actually at issue. I do not say that presuppositionalists hold this deflationary view of truth, but they do hold it for all other people. They agree with the pragmatist philosophers of science that that is all scientific and non-Christian thinkers are up to is forming a set of beliefs that works for their pre-existing purposes. But it is problematic to admit that any human being is only up to that. We can admit that what people care to think

about is determined by their cares, but thought itself has an internal orientation to truth and cannot be diverted from this inherent teleology. This is required by a recognition of human beings as possessed of the faculty of thought, and ultimately, as being in the divine image. At the same time, presuppositionalists almost accept pragmatism for themselves as well, since what system of beliefs one adopts is determined by the achievement of salvation. There is an insufficient distinction between practical and theoretical thought.

11

A Priorism

By this, I mean a stuffing a lot of content into the realm of *a priori* thought. Many thinkers have held that some knowledge is gained prior to experience, or underlies and structures experience. But presuppositionalism claims that the full content of Christian revelation essentially plays this role. All thought depends on the assumption of the ontological Trinity. While presuppositionalists may say that this content is known through revelation, they also insist that all thought falls apart without it. Presumably, one could examine the structure of human thought and guess at what is missing, as presuppositionalists encourage unbelievers to do. If the Tri-

nity and Incarnation are presuppositions of rational thought, then they must have some connection to the *a priori*.

The Myth of "The Given"

Christian presuppositionalism makes an error of the type that Wilfrid Sellars criticized as “the myth of the ‘Given.’” That error is to think that mind encounters any data that is freely given to it as true and indubitable with its active, i.e., spontaneous role in receiving and interpreting that data. This can be shown to be a myth in that anything that comes from outside the mind is of a different character and bears the wrong relationship to it to serve as a foundation for knowledge. For example, brute sense data, imposing themselves on the mind: If something is imposed on

the mind or bears a causal relation to the mind, it provides no justification to thought. The “because” of thought is not the “because” of causal relation but of rational justification. If the proper explanation of your thought is “because” such-and-such brought your belief about, you have as yet given no reason to justify the belief, or at best, a reason of the wrong sort. Even if the reason is, “God put it there,” something is amiss. The problem is both that you may still be skeptical of a belief that God has put in you, in theory, and that the reason is of the wrong sort. It is a somewhat incoherent state of mind to imagine that you can see no reason to believe what you believe, but since God put that belief there, you will go on believing it. You cannot hold a belief because of its causal origin; you can only hold a belief for a reason that is a rational justification. As I would go on to explain, Christian pre-

suppositionalism turns out to be not “Reformed,” Calvinist philosophy, but *hyper-Calvinist* philosophy, destroying human agency or spontaneity in the face of divine activity.

13

Positivism

Positivism and the Myth of "The Given" are closely related, but positivism itself is the view that something gives a firm and indubitable starting point for knowledge that is itself unquestionable. Logical positivism took it that empirical data were unquestionable and a proper foundation upon which to build the superstructure of knowledge. Theological positivism, "the positivism of revelation," as Wolfhart Pannenberg puts it, takes it that the word of God is that unquestionable foundation that must simply be accepted to give theology, and in fact, all knowledge a foundation. The difficulty for this view is the fact that God's revelation can be questioned by

the human mind. We can ask whether these words are God's words; we can ask whether this man is God incarnate; and the answer is not given to us apart from our asking the question.

14

Mechanism

This is Wittgenstein's name for what we are after when we desire an external standpoint from our own to confirm the truth of our view, combined with the sense that some psychological mechanism is keeping us on the rails of righteousness or truth. The fact is, we don't know that the mechanism of, say, the Holy Spirit is working in our own case. We can't guarantee the truth of our perspective from the outside. John McDowell criticizes this as the desire for a "sideways-on perspective" on the mind.

15

Knowledge Externalism

Knowledge Externalism is the idea that there is no subjective condition for knowledge; whether you know something or not is determined from without your ken. Skepticism generally precedes from a recognition that everything can look right subjectively; it seems like you have knowledge. But because of an external breakdown, you do not have knowledge. Externalism answers this by saying that knowledge can be yours because of something outside your purview entirely, for example, that conditions are in fact correct, a correct causal connection exists between your

mind and the world, you are in an epistemic situation prepared by evolutionary history, etc.

Presuppositionalism thinks it can do the same thing by appealing to regeneration and the work of the Holy Spirit upon the mind. My mind has no ability to tell what is the case in the world. It has only a capacity to be told. But without the ability to tell, we can't even tell that we are being told something, or that what we are being told is to be believed. But presuppositionalists insist that the fact that God is tinkering with my mind in a certain way is sufficient to warrant my belief. This is "naturalistic epistemology" in supernaturalistic guise.

An alternative is to hold that when we know, we see that something is the case. We do not necessarily "know that we know," but our thought does have justi-

fication and what we know is open to our view. We are not blind; we can see.

16

Psychologism

Presuppositionalism presupposes a contentious view of logic. It views the laws of logic as radically indexed to individual psychology. Thus, each person exercises his own logic, based on his own unbelieving principles. In turn, the correct laws of logic are those given by God and determined by his thought. In early analytic philosophy, Kant and then Frege critiqued the reduction of logic to psychology. Presuppositionalism imitates this in claiming that different people have different logics on the basis of their religious commitments, and in that the laws of logic are not simply the laws of thought, purely formal without

determining its content, but are the laws of God's thought. This is a divine psychologism. The better position is that the laws of logic are laws of thought, but that they impose no limit to thought, but rather constitute what can be understood as "thought" at all.

II

**UNINTENDED
ALLIES**

17

Descartes

Descartes conceived of a world radically devoid of intelligibility, except for bare scientific understanding. He was driven to nominalism and voluntarism as a result. We could only know the natures of things, and that anything existed at all, by divine revelation, or because God exists.

18

Hume

I have already indicated affinities between presuppositionalism and empirical positivism. Here, I intend to show that presuppositionalism accepts a philosophy that derives from the most skeptical and radical empiricist of all, Hume. Hume showed that if all knowledge is empirical, we don't have knowledge of anything. We can observe the things we think stand in causal relationships, but we cannot observe causation itself. If we limit ourselves purely to what is empirical, we can have no knowledge of causation, substance, unity over time, induction, and so on. Furthermore, we cannot extrapolate to the existence of God. This is where it

gets crazy. Presuppositionalism swallows Hume (and Kant) wholesale on his criticisms of the arguments for God's existence. When a presuppositionalist professor presents the arguments for God's existence, he presents them poorly and then finishes with Hume's critiques: "See? The arguments for God's existence don't work!" Actually, that is a very contentious position. In fact, not even Hume could see his way through them entirely. Daniel Dennett is forced to admit, in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, that not even Hume could deny that there had to be a deistic first cause or designer. Presuppositionalism is more skeptical than Hume. Presuppositionalism claims to be outside and above philosophy. Actually it is simply bad philosophy, swallowing wholesale every bad philosophical idea, unthinkingly.

19

Kant

Presuppositionalism indisputably and radically embraces Kantian constructivism, that the human mind structures experience, and so can only know things as constituted by the mind, rather than as they are in themselves. It is no help that the mind is to structure things according to the will and word of God, because this still involves us in a radical skepticism about knowledge of the world, and an impasse in communication between believers and unbelievers. The fact is that most of our understanding of the world seems unmediated and uncorrupted by thought; there is a way of grasping things that is

not an interpretation. The idea that we need God to tell us everything assumes that he created human minds radically disconnected from the given world. We are floating Cartesian or Kantian subjects, entirely distinct from the givenness of the world.

20

Hegel

In insisting that the full content of the doctrine of the Trinity operates as a foundation for rational thought, presuppositionalism shows itself to be closely related to the philosophy of Hegel. Hegel himself made the same claim, that all of reality and thought divided into triads that could be shown, logically, to depend on a fundamental threeness in the divine being. Hegel himself borrows this thought from Anselm. In taking this position, presuppositionalism allies itself to certain earlier strands of Christian thought, but one's that it cannot claim are unphilosophical.

21

Barth

There is no theologian the presuppositionalist hates more than Thomas Aquinas, except for Karl Barth. And this is because there is no theologian who hates Thomas Aquinas and natural theology as much as the Van Tillian, except for Karl Barth. Barthianism and presuppositionalism are all but identical. In fact, to the broader theological world, the twentieth-century Reformed attack on natural theology is quite familiar, but as a product of Karl Barth's writings, not those of Cornelius Van Til. Then why does the Van Tillian hate Karl Barth so much? Because Karl Barth holds exactly the same views as them, except that he

does not hold to the inerrancy of Scripture. He makes a distinction between Scripture and the Word of God. But he still believes that the Word of God is the only starting point for theology, God's revelation to man in Christ is the only starting point for theology. All theology must begin from revelation, and not from nature. (They also say that Karl Barth doesn't believe in the historical resurrection, which is absurd. He faulted Emil Brunner for not holding to the virgin birth, and you think he doesn't hold to the resurrection?) Both Barth and Van Til retreat from natural theology because they have entirely accepted the modern critique of natural theology, the modern secularization of the natural world in the natural sciences. Rather than challenging this understanding of nature in its own right, they swallow it, and then have to argue that God is only made known through

direct revelation. But stop: The Van Tillian insists that there is general revelation through creation, only our minds suppress it, and we have to understand general revelation in the light of special revelation. I suppose that makes for a distinction between the positions in theory, but not in practice. A revelation that is entirely obstructed reveals nothing. A revelation that actually reveals does not require, in principle, supplementation by an interpretive device. Special revelation can clarify general revelation (Calvin's glasses), but if it's only glasses, and not eye-transplants, then general revelation was getting through and Van Til is wrong as well. The Van Tillian is worried that he won't be distinct from a theologian who denies inerrancy, but sorry, you're indistinguishable. The problems in your theological structure are not solved by insisting on a doctrine

of inerrancy - who knows how you found out that the Bible was inerrant... That seems a bit demanding compared to Barth, who just wants you to encounter the “Word of God” enough to get the gist of the gospel.

Modernity

What is modernism? The conceit that you are modern. Other options are given, the rejection of Aristotelianism, the embrace of empirical science, the embrace of political liberalism, etc. But each has its exceptions. What holds all together is the conceit of being modern. Bacon and Descartes reject the Aristotelianism of the past in favor of mechanistic, empirical science. Descartes rejects scholastic philosophy and all of his traditional beliefs to begin thought from the “I think” up. Hume thinks that the traditional arguments for God’s existence must be more or less scrapped, not to mention our confidence

in the senses, inductive reasoning, belief in causality, and more. Kant seeks to reverse the entire order of the relation between thought and reality, giving the dictum, “Think for yourself” a whole new meaning. Hegel thinks that all of history has been leading up to his political situation and his ability to sit atop history and produce his idealist philosophy. Liberal theologians and biblical scholars scrap the interpretation and thought of the past to invent Christianity anew. This is modernism. Presuppositionalism is itself just another iteration of modernism, in an orthodox guise. It says that all the Christian thought up to this point was contaminated by philosophical principles, but CVT is the first to strip Christianity of this contamination. Only CVT calls all into question and begins from the ontological Trinity. Likewise CVT adopts hook, line, and sinker the

modern rejection of natural theology, which, up until at least Hume, few individuals found they could deny. (Even Hume couldn't really shake free of the suspicion that there had to be some designer.) The very ability to call this into question is a modern phenomenon. Christian thinkers of the past rarely questioned the validity of arguments for God's existence (Ockham? Scotus?), but CVT questions them all. The presuppositionalists' favorite philosophers are Hume and Kant, even if they won't admit it. They will read off the arguments of Aquinas with a chuckle, showing in the next slide that Hume and Kant defeated these arguments long ago. And Hume and Kant are just correct about that? I thought you didn't want to admit that philosophers got things right? Christian presuppositionalism is, there's no way around it, modern.

23

Postmodernity

Postmodernism is essentially the view that there is no objective truth, but only subjective perspectives. Clearly, the Van Tillian embraces the idea of objective truth, but he denies universal access to that objective truth. The Van Tillian joins with the postmodernist in denying that there is any touchpoint outside of one's own perspective to test one's beliefs. In fact, the presuppositionalist positively advocates that you reason on the basis of your own presuppositions and do not seek to ground your beliefs in something accessible to those who do not share your perspective. Clearly, the presuppositionalist has his reasons for

doing this; but the fundamental structure is the same. Atheists think from atheistic presuppositions, Christians from Christian presuppositions; White people have their perspective, black people have theirs; straight people have their perspective; gay people have theirs. When you combine this perspectivism with a belief in absolute truth, you conclude that people can only think the way that people of their type can think, and since only your type of thinking happens to be correct, everyone else is simply disconnected from reality fundamentally. In other words, they are sub-rational, irrational, or insane. That is really bad - but that will have to wait for “Dogmatism.”

III

**THEOLOGICAL
ERRORS**

24

Fundamentalism

According to Alvin Plantinga, “fundamentalism” means “someone whose religious views are somewhat to the right of one’s own.” I intend the term in a more determinate way, though I could be accused of the derogatory usage. I mean by the term a rejection of the universally human and the common realm of discourse that retreats into a sectarian religious viewpoint. This familiar religious attitude is made into philosophical principle by presuppositionalism. Communication with unbelievers is not only difficult; it is inappropriate. The presuppositionalist condemns the common, secular sphere

of shared human activity, in which one's distinctive religious commitments do not change the nature of thought and activity. In this way, presuppositionalism encourages an exaggeration of the conflict between Christian and non-Christian (which is already large enough not to require exaggeration). That Christians believe that Jesus Christ was God, died for the sins of man, and rose again for our justification seems distinctive enough, without insisting that the non-Christian's mathematics (philosophy of mathematics) is deficient.

25

Pietism

The refusal to test one's beliefs against rational standards is to require a pious commitment in place of rational consideration. For this reason, debates among presuppositionalists, and between presuppositionalists and others, are interpreted by presuppositionalists as tests of piety. One's piety is shown by the beliefs one holds. The more sectarian and extreme one's form of presuppositionalism, the more one's piety is shown. This comes from a too close identification of faith with one's intellectual beliefs. If faith is shown by accepting the right presuppositions, and many Christians

do not meet presuppositionalist standards, the implication is that such Christians are lower in faith or piety. Ultimately, without common standards of rationality, presuppositionalist faith is a retreat to commitment. It is not a conviction of the intellect, but a commitment of the will.

26

Fideism

In rejecting rationality, presuppositionalism can ask for nothing but a leap of faith. If one can only reason from presuppositions, and presuppositions are not universally shared, then switching presuppositions cannot be rational, nor can be one's original adherence to such presuppositions. Thus, presuppositionalism is straightforwardly fideistic.

Biblicism

Biblicism is another epithet that can simply be derogatory, but its actual meaning is a focus on the Bible to the exclusion of other sources of knowledge, or an appeal to the Bible in a context in which appeal to the Bible should not even be necessary. Consider the presuppositionalist position on basic perceptual beliefs, mathematics, and logic. In each case, appeal is made to the Bible, or to Reformed doctrine, where no additional appeal should be necessary. Of course we know such things. No one needs to read the Bible to know such things. Yes, skepticism plays a role in philosophy, but should

Christians accept skepticism wholesale and offer a skeptical solution? Likewise, presuppositionalism claims that Biblical revelation is foundational for absolutely everything, which makes no intelligent differentiation between areas to which the Bible speaks more or less. It also doesn't recognize the Bible as having a specific purpose, the revelation of the way of salvation, not our deliverance from the Cartesian skeptical scenario.

Mysticism

Finally, presuppositionalism is a form of mysticism in its rejection of philosophical thought. It suggests that God is above the possibility of verbal speech and description, and even of logical understanding. In embracing illogic and mystery, presuppositoinalism leaves behind genuine thought of God, genuine theology, for a purely apophatic mysticism, that says only what God is not.

29

Cultishness

Presuppositionalism also cultivates a cult mentality, the idea of unthinking obedience to a cause, and exclusion of those who do not tow the line. It treats a handful of figures as saints, rather than encouraging freedom of thought.

Hyper-Calvinism

“Hyper-Calvinism” is another term of abuse, like “Fundamentalism.” But it has a determinate meaning: A construal of God’s sovereign initiative that undermines human agency. Usually this refers to God’s initiative in salvation that undermines human activity in exercising faith, pursuing sanctification, or in evangelizing. But in epistemology, hyper-Calvinism manifests itself in revelational positivism, in the “myth of the Given,” the denial of the human ability and responsibility to think rationally and actively to arrive at Christian beliefs. Beliefs are rather

passively received. A worldview is inserted into the head. This denies the element of activity that thought requires, not (like fideism) a voluntaristic construal of thought, but rather what Aristotle and Aquinas identify as the “active intellect” and what Kant calls the “spontaneity” of thought. Our belief is a product of the activity of our own faculties. We cannot offload the responsibility for thought to someone else. If you simply find yourself with beliefs that you did not think your way to, then you do not really think them; they are not really your beliefs. Thinking involves, in a different way than willing, a manifestation of agency and activity. We are the subjects who believe. If divine agency is emphasized to the exclusion of human agency, then there is no room for subjects who themselves believe. This element of activity is not the presuppositionalist,

fideistic, voluntaristic, pragmatist, coherentist, postmodernist idea of human subjectivity at work in thought. It is simply the recognition of the human subject as a distinct source of activity from God. There can be no occasionalism of beliefs; they are not simply given by God but arrived at, however receptively, by the human mind. John McDowell writes about the scientific positivist's rejection of the responsibility to think. Theological positivism manifests the same problem.

Anabaptism

In the spectrum of theological views, presuppositionalism exhibits the commitments, not of the Reformation, but of the Radical Reformation. While holding in many parts to a traditional Reformed theology, its distinctive elements all have the character of the Anabaptist rejection of the secular and worldly. Catholicism made the church too worldly in an attempt to make the world more holy. Anabaptism rejected the world radically in an attempt to secure the church's holiness. But the Reformation position was to simply admit the divine appointment and blessing of the secular orders, so to

abandon the mission to redeem the elements of this world. They were already blessed by God for their penultimate purpose. The institution of the church itself could not claim to be any more than a novel secular order, through which God works. Only the invisible church, not of this age, was purely holy, the actual locus of God's spiritual activity. In the presuppositionalist rejection of this-worldly science, philosophy, and thought, and the desire to redeem every area of inquiry, to make every practice "Christian," presuppositionalism exhibits a combination of the Catholic triumphalism and the Anabaptist retreat from the world. Both share the conviction that the world itself is a fundamentally godless thing. A "truly Reformed" position would not so denigrate creation as to deny creation its relative autonomy in God's purpose.

I V

**INTELLECTUAL
VICES**

Argumentum ad Hominem

By this, I mean to say that a presuppositionalist's arguments almost invariably reduce to ad hominem attacks. While people's beliefs are undoubtedly shaped by their character and desires, this recognition is not limited to Christians. Many people recognize this feature of human beings, but we still aspire in our intellectual discourse to avoid the ad hominem, not because we don't suspect our opponents have bad motives some of the time, but because we think that the question of motive and the question of truth are

separate. If someone can provide an adequate argument for his belief, we are less inclined to attribute it to ill-motives. So too, to the extent that our beliefs are shown to be unjustified, our character comes into question. But if all intellectual discourse slides into slights against character, we cannot speak to one another, but only sling allegations this way and that. The definitive argument against this approach is that non-Christians differ wildly in their worldviews, and in their proximity to a Christian worldview. Clearly the fundamental opposition to God can manifest itself more or less, and sometimes very little. Likewise, Christians, whose hearts are presumably reoriented to God, differ on many questions, not all of which call into question their character or piety. Presuppositionalists have a difficult time making these distinctions.

Authoritarianism

By this, I mean that presuppositionalism assumes a certain authority that it cannot justify to other participants in debate. The most obvious case of this is in its application to politics. The Christian presuppositionalist magistrate must enact laws on the basis of principles he does not think the non-Christian subject can understand or access.

34

Rationalism

I accuse presuppositionalism of rationalism in that it has an extreme focus on theoretical, metaphysical knowledge as the basis of life. It thinks everyone has a metaphysic, and your metaphysical beliefs undergird whether you have the right to believe that 2 and 2 are 4. Consider its opposition to so-called “Common-Sense Realism.” Who would oppose the idea that there are a large number of beliefs that aren’t really philosophically questionable? Presuppositionalists. They give too much priority to theological and philosophical knowledge when most knowledge can be had without ascending and abstracting to the theoretical.

35

*Anti-
Intellectualism*

Presuppositionalism also exhibits anti-intellectualism in its disdain for philosophy and generally the pursuit of human knowledge outside theological study. Of course, it is also specifically perturbed by the faculty of the intellect itself. It accuses any exercise of the intellect that is not purely receptive to biblical revelation (or minimally active in interpreting Scripture by Scripture) of sinful autonomy. But the fact is that the intellect has its own standards; reason is directed by its internal standards to seek truth. It must be allowed its own autonomy, which is simply its own

activity. Likewise, each independent sphere of human knowledge has its own relative autonomy. This can't simply be denied. What makes chemistry good chemistry is determined by standards internal to chemistry. Each discipline need not defer or refer to theology to begin and to continue. To require disciplines to borrow premises from each other is to elide the distinctions among the disciplines.

36

Dilettantism

Resulting from its anti-intellectualism, presuppositionalism presumes to speak, and in fact is forced by its own principles to speak, about areas it knows little about. Beginning in philosophy, presuppositionalism takes it that all philosophies are false, which is so bold a claim that one would think it would have to be continually under investigation. But presuppositionalism presumes to have the authority to speak on all philosophies without having the possibility of authority. But philosophy is where presuppositionalism is supposed to reign. It then extends itself even further beyond its purview in

pronouncing upon every other academic discipline a poverty of its own. It takes it that all sciences have implicitly atheistic premises, and so presumes to say to its practitioners that they are not practicing their science well. And the assumption that all philosophies are wrong, and that all sciences are flawed, function as principles of presuppositionalism, starting points for thought, rather than measured conclusions.

Intellectual Servility

This is very derogatory, but I mean it to refer to the presuppositionalist's attitude to the Bible. Just as the Catholic is morally and religiously obliged not to believe in the permissibility of contraception or divorce but must obsequiously defer to the authority of the magisterium, the presuppositionalist treats Scripture as something that simply cannot be questioned. But Scripture must be questioned. We cannot simply close our minds and follow Scripture instead of thinking. In order to follow Scripture at all, we must believe it; we must be convinced that it

is to be believed and followed. Our attitude to Scripture should not be servile, but willingly submissiveness. We submit to Scripture's dictates for our faith and life because we are persuaded of its claims about the truth of God. This type of intellectual inquiry is nothing like "placing God in the dock." Rather, Scripture calls us to see if these things be true, to have an answer for our faith. It does encourage us to believe without seeing, but not to believe without thinking, as if that could even be done.

38

Radicalism

Presuppositionalism encourages a sort of radicalism, a rejection of all things secular, pre-Van Til, or non-Reformed. An essayist once wrote of the comparison between Calvinism and Bolshevism. This is what he was thinking of. Presuppositionalism also exhibits the radical left-wing tendency to move further and further down a trajectory, excluding more and more people who aren't "with it" enough. Its own philosophical principles are purely negative, encouraging the tearing down of things that are good, but not good enough for the presuppositionalist.

Hagiography

Presuppositionalism believes that the truths of theology and philosophy are quite isolated to a handful of presuppositionalist thinkers. Chiefly, though depending on the presupper, Cornelius Van Til. But it is unwise to put so much weight on singular thinkers. Every thinker has his own idiosyncrasies, Van Til certainly included. The idea that only Van Til really saw through to the conclusions of Reformed theology denigrates the contributions of earlier Reformed theologians and exaggerates absurdly the contribution of Van Til.

40

Ideology

This attribution is a companion to “philosophical.” Ideology is the defective version of philosophy. It includes genuine philosophical positions, but held in a defective way. Ideology also tends to hold things uncritically and to demand action on its controversial premises, denying their controversy. In doing so, ideology is dangerous, because it is closed to criticism, only allowing criticism from within its own ranks, and gradually narrowing the range of acceptable positions by virtue of this narrowness.

41

Moralism

“Moralism is bad for thinking.”

– F. H. Bradley

Moralism is the intrusion of moral opinion into areas where it is neither necessary nor relevant. Presuppositionalism inserts morality into the heart of thought, where it is especially unwelcome. At every turn, presuppositionalism chastises that one ought not to think in this way, and that one ought to think in this other, more Christian way. If the “ought” were the “ought” of right thinking, this would be welcome. But, given that the “ought” is the “ought” of morality, we have an introduction into the content and

method of thought of something foreign to it. Forget the philosophical objection that one cannot think thus and such because it is morally commendable. It remains that one oughtnot think in ways that are not determined by logic and thought itself. Thought has its own form and principles. The introduction of morality and preaching into the heart of logical thought is especially unwelcome.

V

**POLITICAL
PROBLEMS**

Identitarianism

Identitarianism is the use of an identity marker for political purposes. For the presuppositionalist, there is a politically significant inequality between Christians and non-Christians, such that the religious identity of an individual has political significance. Because Christians and non-Christians cannot share an even limited conception of the common good, presuppositionalism inevitably makes one's religious identity as a Christian politically salient. This mark of identity can be used in one of two ways, in an Anabaptist and separatist way, or in a totalitarian and theonomist way. Either way, religious identity becomes a chief political marker.

43

Tribalism

Tribalism is the phenomenon of people acting as members of relatively closed groups, that can be pitted against one another, and that act as a group. As presuppositionalists deny the possibility of communication across religious lines, they inevitably must act in a religiously tribal way. The mentality of the presuppositionalist is an “us-vs.-them” mentality. We are Christians; all others are against us. Tribalism can only be allayed by a willingness to communicate across boundaries and have shared understanding across identity groups, as by the creation of broader, shared identities.

Theocracy

Theonomy (theocracy) is a political system in which law and government are supposed to be based on divine commands and authority. The difficulty with such a system comes with how it treats religious outsiders. What does it do to justify its rule to them, and does it recognize them politically? Since the presuppositionalist believes that the word of God cannot be understood by those who lack saving faith, the proper rules of a Christian commonwealth would not be known and understood by its non-Christian members. These rules would appear to be arbitrary and illegitimate, undermining the authority

of the state. And to subject human beings to laws that they cannot even in principle comprehend seems *prima facie* unjust. There is a reasonable demand, by liberal politics, that political debate should be based on public reason. Presuppositionalism cannot meet this demand, and so its political recommendations smack of theonomy.

45

Heteronomy

Heteronomy is allowing one's thoughts and actions in a particular realm of life be dictated by something from outside of, and foreign to, that realm. This can include everything from allowing one's beliefs to be dictated by one's desires and interests to curating the content of a film according to the political message of the ruling power. In the realm of thought, this is the same as the intellectual servility mentioned above, outsourcing one's responsibility for belief to an intellectual authority. In the realm of politics, this is the tyranny of the political sphere by theological dictates, manifested psychologically in

the phenomenon that the principles on which politics are governed are not themselves products of political thought, but of (purported) direct divine revelation. This is especially so for unbelievers who will be governed by rules that they cannot see as the expression of their own will and their own good. But in fact, even Christians in this case are not being governed by principles that are open to their own political, prudential thinking. They must accept principles heteronomously, letting their own thoughts be dictated by doctrine from outside the realm of thought. The doctrine of the natural law was meant to express that Christians and non-Christians alike have an awareness of right and wrong that can be appealed to to justify law and politics. In fact, it is better for both Christians and non-Christians when the civil sphere and the present age are governed

by principles proper to them, rather than by principles of the spiritual sphere and the age to come.

46

Illiberalism

Liberalism is the political doctrine that the role of government is to protect the rights of individuals and not to realize one particular religious or philosophical conception of the ultimate good. Illiberalism is the transgression of this secularity and neutrality by one sect or another. Liberalism, in this classical sense, is not the unbridled libertinism of modern times, but rather the fruit of the Protestant insight that individual conscience cannot be coerced, and that faith is not of this age but of the age to come. Liberalism is not secularism, nor is it relativism. It is the purposeful forestalling of utopian ambition. It is the

collective purpose not to realize the utopian purposes of one sect within a community, even if that sect makes up the majority. It is the will to keep politics mundane, focused on the common political good, which is itself secular, of this age. It is also characterized by the willingness to engage in public dialogue in a community of reason. Presuppositionalism rejects the sphere of public reason and insists on reasoning only on parochial principles, that are political tribal. It can make no political pronouncement that is not exclusive and illiberal, specific to one religious sect, presupposing one particular conception of the good. It refuses to speak to fellow citizens in terms of this world, common and shared, and insists on speaking only of the world to come, illicitly subjecting this age to principles of the age to come. Presuppositionalism is not of this world,

though that is not itself a problem. Its failure is that it refuses to be in this world. (And without that, how can one even communicate to those who are here how they might attain to the world to come?)

47

Integralism

Integralism is the political dream of a society united around shared religious principles, and a rejection of modern political liberalism. Presuppositionalist Christianity is bound to be integralist in practice because of its rejection of secular rationality and of the limitation of political discourse to the secular, mundane, this-worldly. Integralism is not wrong in principle; it is only wrong in modern practice, in that (most of) the countries presuppositionalists inhabit are not predominantly practicing Christian (much less practicing Reformed Christian). In such situations, integralism is improper because of

considerations of political prudence and philosophic principle. A liberal order accommodates citizenry of different religious beliefs but is still free to maintain political order and must be met with conservative social institutions and traditions from the side of civil society. Presuppositionalism refuses to accommodate and so is un-neighborly, in addition to being illiberal.

48

Utopianism

Utopianism is the desire to realize on earth, in the present age, the ideal social world. Characteristically, the desire for perfection obscures recognition of the tragic and postlapsarian conditions of existence, which limit the possibility of realizing utopian on earth. Presuppositionalism, assuming its integralist and theonomic trajectory, must be politically utopian. Political thought founded on Christianity alone with no secular principles must aspire to realize a Christian state and society, if it has any political ambitions. Lacking those political ambitions, presuppositionalism will still be utopian

within a more limited sphere. In general, the refusal to accommodate to the world's imperfections is utopian, so, for example, a refusal to speak with unbelievers on terms that are shared and comprehensible to the unbeliever is itself utopian in principle.

49

Puritanism

By “Puritanism,” I mean the suppression of natural human tendencies and the co-opting of autonomous spheres of cultural activity in the service of a religious or philosophical vision of human perfection. By regarding human reason and autonomous human activity as inherently sinful, presuppositionalism is Puritanical, after the manner of Plato and Platonists ever since. In the arts, a presuppositionalist could not allow for art that is comprehensible in a universal, human way without appeal to or basis in Christian doctrine. Each art, skill, and practice must be governed by principles that are external to it, restricting their

natural and proper development, and directing them in a moralistic and propagandistic direction. Presuppositionalism disallows shared cultural and human experience, insisting that everything the Christian does be distinctively “Christian.” In this, presuppositionalism denies the realm of nature, of the created, of the universally human, and of the aesthetic and cultural.

50

Bolshevism

From “Bolshevism and Calvinism,”
by Edwin Muir:

“My purpose in this essay is to draw a comparison between Calvinism and Bolshevism ... The following statements are true of Calvinism. First, it was a deterministic theory holding that certain changes were inevitable and that its own ultimate triumph was assured. Secondly, to concentrate its force it possessed one central scripture reinforced by a mass of guiding exegesis, and encouraged the unremitting study of that scripture, attributing to all secular literature, of whatever nature, a

secondary importance. Thirdly, on the model of its scripture it set up a complete new system of life and created a new machinery which was designed to be at once theoretically sound and practically efficient. Fourthly, in its secular policy it was eminently realistic, employing the pretext of liberty, as all young movements do before they attain power, but using the same weapons as its enemies: that is, repression and discipline within, and craft and force without. Fifthly, while in its triumph still hostile to literature and other forms of traditional culture, it showed an extraordinary enthusiasm for education and an almost fanatical belief in its efficacy. Sixthly, it essentially sought and secured the victory of a class which was at the time under a stigma, for 'the elect' were roughly the new commercial stratum which was already beginning to rise to the top. Seventhly, once it had

triumphed it set up a dictatorship by committees and preferred the claims of the mass to those of the individual, exercising a strict control over people's private affairs. Eighthly, it revolted against the traditional conception of love and marriage, and while disgusted by the romantic attitudes of chivalry, made divorce easier, at once rationalising and loosening the marriage tie. And finally, it was in its policy international and revolutionary, from a convenient centre encouraging rebellion against the old order in other countries.

“Let us see how this picture fits Bolshevism. Bolshevism, too, is founded on a deterministic theory, envisages an inevitable triumph, is inspired by one book to which it attributes infallibility, relegates secular literature to a secondary position, has elaborated a complete new system and machinery of

politics founded on its chief scripture, and is trying to perfect that machinery so as to achieve the utmost efficiency. It is eminently realistic in its policy, essentially seeks the victory of a single class, once under a stigma, and rulse now in its triumph in Russia by a dictatorship of committees. It is in revolt against whatever romanticises the relations between the sexes, and to its adherents women are ‘comrades’ just as to the early Calvinists women were ‘sisters’. And finally it has antipathy to traditional culture and a sanguine faith in education, and is both international and revolutionary.”

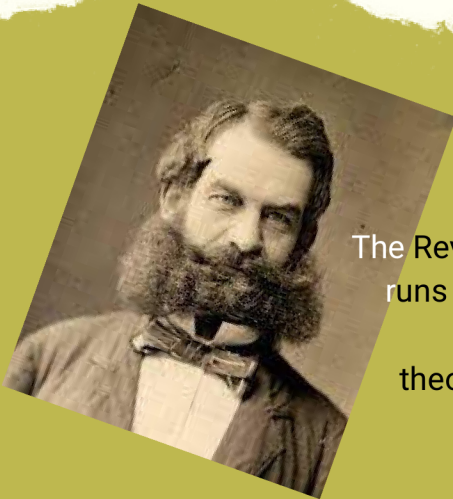
Advance Criticism of
50 Errors of Christian Presuppositionalism

"You're an Arminian."

-Unnamed professor of course on Aquinas that didn't include a word of Aquinas' writing (Said to the author, paraphrase)

"Bro, have you even *read* Van Til?"

-Every single Van Tillian ever (Said to the author, paraphrase)



The Rev. Dr. Gordon van Clark III runs an online magazine from his garage, rehashing theological debates from the mid-twentieth century.

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