BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS:
PRESUPPOSITIONALISM, CIRCULAR REASONING, AND THE CHARGE OF FIDEISM

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Perhaps the single most common argument against the apologetic method of Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) is the charge of fideism. One doesn't have to look far in the relevant literature to find Van Tillians disregarded or said to hold to a position that undermines Christian apologetics.[1] Though the term "fideism" is being rehabilitated in some circles[2], fideism is anti-apologetic and widely understood as a dogmatic proclamation of one's view irrespective of rational argument. Nothing seems to demonstrate the fideism of presuppositionalism, so it is believed, as their rejection of linear reasoning. Van Tillians are said to embrace, as a fundamental rule of their approach, the fallacy of begging the question.

If this is true, presuppositionalists fail to adequately "give a reason for [their] hope" in Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 3:15). Van Til is painted as an authoritarian who makes bare authority claims without appeal to the content of Christian faith.[3] If argumentation is flouted then all that remains is a shouting match between competing authority claims. This brings to mind the argumentative stalemate in the "apologetic parable" of the "Shadoks" and the "Gibis" by John Warwick Montgomery in Van Til's festschrift *Jerusalem and Athens*.[4]

The Purpose of this Article

Too often in the literature Van Tillians are dismissed by the twin charges of circularity and fideism. In fact, I would dare say most objections to Van Til's approach are rooted in these apparent boogey-men. As a result, Van Til has become another example of how *not* to do apologetics. In contrast, over the past twenty-five years an increasing number of apologetic works have been released that aim to integrate the best insights of both the Traditional method (consisting of the classicist and evidentialist schools) and Presuppositionalism.[5] That these camps are growing closer through dialogue

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[1] For the remainder of this work I will use the term 'presuppositionalism' ('presuppositionalists,' etc) as synonymous with a Van Tillian apologetic methodology.

[2] Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 358.

[3] See also Gordon R. Lewis, *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), chapter 5, "The Biblical Authoritarianism of Cornelius Van Til."

[4] See his "Once Upon an A Priori," *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971). John M. Frame refers to the account as a "apologetic parable" in *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 307.

[5] Cf. Ronald B. Mayers, *Balanced Apologetics: Using Evidences and Presuppositions in Defense of the Faith* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), Richard B. Ramsay, *Certainty of the Faith: Apologetics in an Uncertain World* (Phillipburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008). Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman Jr., *Faith has its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed. (Waynesboro: Paternoster, 2006). Note also how acknowledging determinative power of philosophical presuppositions strengths the argument against the Jesus Seminar in *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, eds. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), introduction.

is promising indeed, and the present work is geared toward further removing obstacles to integration.

        The objective of this essay is twofold. First, we will examine the charge of question-begging by distinguishing between vicious and virtuous circles. I argue that presuppositionalists embrace the latter but eschew the former just as their critics do. Second, I will show that the charge of fideism is both imprecise and inaccurate.

The "Problem" of Presuppositional Methodology

        I should acknowledge here that presuppositionalists have in fact made statements embracing circularity, seemingly strengthening the charge of fideism. Cornelius Van Til himself confessed, "The Reformed apologist will frankly admit that his own methodology presupposes the truth of Christian theism."[6] For some, such comments seem to close the book on presuppositionalism as a valid method. Since apologetics aims at demonstrating the rational credibility of Christianity, any approach that renounces argumentation is beyond the pale.

        The syclla of fideism. The charge of fideism can be made in two interdependent ways. Negatively, one can be labeled a fideist if one denies the need for, or existence of, logical reasons for maintaining Christian theism. Surely, Van Tillian thinker Rousas Rushdoony goes too far when he says, "It is blasphemy therefore to attempt to 'prove' God; God is the necessary presupposition of all proof."[7] Positively, the charge can be made of someone who claims that arational or irrational faith is the only acceptable ground for assenting to Christianity. The relation between these two forms should be apparent: if all rational grounds for Christianity are denied, we are left with faith alone. While this is vital to a Protestant doctrine of justification, it is deadly to apologetics. Van Til and his followers have been accused of both positive and negative fideism.

        In *Faith Beyond Reason*, C. Stephen Evans provides an example of the negative charge. In his words,

> **Van Til …vigorously reject[s] the claim that apologetic arguments can be mounted that appeal to facts or logical principles that the unregenerate mind can grasp.** Such an apologetic argument ignores the non-neutrality of human reason and implicitly concedes that sinful human reason can operate reliably. **Van Til argues, for example, that** *one should not try to give rational arguments that the Bible is the inspired word of God.*[8]

Likewise, in the entry on "Faith and Reason," in *101 Philosophical Terms and their Importance for Theology,* the author characterizes Van Til as a "chastened" fideist. This is because Van Til affirms, "a certain antithesis between faith and 'reason'…"[9]

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[6] *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd Ed. (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 99-100.

[7] *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 127.

[8] *Faith Beyond Reason: A Kierkegaardian Account* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 19, emphasis added. John G. Stockhouse Jr. also comes very close to making the same claim in his *Humble Apologetics: Defending the Faith Today* (New York, Oxford, 2002), 157.

[9] Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004, 28. It should be noted that saying Van Til posits a "certain antithesis" between faith and reason is much too vague to justify calling anyone a fideist when, as we see below, granting antithetical definitions, any Christian can affirm a "certain" antithesis between the two.

Lastly, Alister McGrath suggests that Van Til belongs to a school of thought that "disavow[s] a rational apologetic."[10]

The positive charge of fideism is seen in the work of John Warwick Montgomery, who writes that Van Til gives "the impression that our gospel is as aprioristically, fideistically irrational as the presuppositional claims of its competitors."[11] Clark Pinnock advances that Van Til calls for "a total and *ungrounded* commitment" to Christianity, one that "*assumes* the theistic clue to ultimate reality…"[12] Unbelievers, says Pinnock, are exhorted to voluntaristically "decide to become Christians and not think about it first. The basis of the choice cannot be known until after the axiom has been espoused."[13] Finally, Pinnock makes the accusation explicit, "[Van Til] cannot escape the charge of fideism, the view that truth in religion is ultimately based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence."[14]

The Charybdis of circular reasoning. If faith is the singular basis for Christian commitment, the only way to do justice to this fact is calling for faith based upon the Bible's own testimony. William Lane Craig comments, "As commonly understood, presuppositionalism is guilty of a logical howler: it commits the informal fallacy of *petitio principii*, or begging the question, for it advocates presupposing the truth of Christian theism in order to prove Christian theism."[15] So inimical to apologetics is circularity that he further states, "It is difficult to imagine how anyone could with a straight face think to show theism to be true by reasoning, 'God exists. Therefore, God exists.'"[16]

Problem statements. As noted earlier, the accusation of fallacious circularity is fanned by statements Van Til and others have made. Here are a few examples from Van Til himself:

- To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, *circular reasoning*.[17]

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[10] *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 221. J. P. Moreland also makes the connection between presuppositionalism and the negative charge of fideism: "One's response to this objection will turn, in part, on one's approach to apologetics. If one is a fideist or a presuppositionalist (roughly, the view that *rational argumentation and evidence cannot be offered as epistemic support* for Christian theism from some neutral starting point), then one may say that begging the question is not a problem here." (*Christianity and the Nature of Science*, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 205, fn. 42. Emphasis added.

[11] "Once upon an A Priori" *Jerusalem and Athens,* as quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and analysis* (Phillipburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1998), 638.

[12] "The Philosophy of Christian Evidences," in *Jerusalem and Athens* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 423. Emphasis added.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid. While Montgomery calls Van Til's approach "fideistically irrational" Pinnock calls it "irrational fideism." So both bases are covered! See ibid., 425.

[15] "A Classical Apologist's Response," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 232.

[16] Ibid., 233.

[17] *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd Ed., 101.

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- The only alternative to "circular reasoning" as engaged in by Christians, no matter on what point they speak, is that of reasoning on the basis of isolated facts and isolated minds with the result that there is no possibility of reasoning at all.[18]

- We hold it to be true that circular reasoning is the only reasoning that is possible to finite man. The method of implication as outlined above is circular reasoning.[19]

Now I turn to statements embracing circularity from Van Tillians:

- Instead of trying to prove the truth of Christianity to the unregenerate, [the presuppositionalist] assumes at the outset and then challenges the natural man by demonstrating that on his presuppositions nothing is true, nothing can be accounted for, and his own thinking is invalid.[20]

- Christians should always refer back to God's word-his self-revelation in words in the Bible-as our final authority. Why do I believe something? Because *God* says so. How do I know that God says so? Because God says he says so![21]

Now, why is circular reasoning fallacious? Begging the question is marked by two traits. First, a viciously circular argument *assumes* its stance rather than providing support for it. In doing this it avoids the burden of proof. According to Douglas N. Walton, author of the only full-length monograph entirely devoted to this topic[22], "The requirement here is one of *evidential priority*. Arguing in a circle becomes a fallacy by basing it on prior acceptance of the conclusion to be proved. So the fallacy of begging the question is a systematic tactic to evade fulfillment of a legitimate *burden of proof*."[23] Second, viciously circular arguments merely restate the conclusion in one of the premises. According to S. Morris Engel, "…if the supporting premises merely repeat or rephrase what is stated in the conclusion, as in all cases of begging the question, *the argument contains no premises* and is therefore fallacious."[24] The authors of *Classical*

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[18] *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2nd Ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), 243

[19] *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, no date listed), 12. This last quotation hints at what Van Til is getting at, but more on that below.

[20] Rousas J. Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Birmingham: Cornerstone Publishers, 1974), 100

[21] Richard B. Ramsay, *The Certainty of the Faith*, 98.

[22] Douglas N. Walton*, Begging the Question: Circular Reasoning as a Tactic of Argumentation* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991)

[23] Douglas N. Walton, "Informal Fallacies," *Blackwell Companson to Epistemology,* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Reference, 1992), Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa, eds. Emphasis added.

[24] *With Good Reason: An Introduction to Informal Fallacies*, 5th edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 147. Emphasis added. J. P. Moreland provides an example of what it means to merely repeat or rephrase what is stated in the conclusion, "Capital punishment is *wrong* because it is an example of something we have *no business doing*, namely, taking a person's life." *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1997), 123-124. "Wrong" and "something we have no business doing" are synonymous, a mere repetition of the same thought in different words.

Apologetics, the largest critique of presuppositional methodology in print, assert that "presuppositionalists frankly admit to the use of circular reasoning in precisely this sense."[25]

   The link between fideism and circularity. Perhaps speaking of Scylla and Charybdis is best switched to Cerberus, the multi-headed beast of Greek and Roman mythology. This is because these twin objections are not separate and discrete as is often presented. Nevertheless, conjuring up the imagery of the two guardians of the Strait of Messina is helpful. Van Tillians face a unique double danger: either they are charged with refusing to reason at all (fideism), or they are charged with arguing poorly by begging the question. Once presuppositionalists are exonerated from the allegation of fallacious circularity, much of the bite of the fideism charge is lost. If Van Tillians are to be considered serious partners in apologetic dialogue, these two beasts must be slain. In addressing these twin objections to presuppositionalism, I will first examine the issue of circularity, followed by the charge of fideism.

Circularity

   If question begging is embraced, fideism is implied. Fideism is the rejection of a rational apologetic, and vicious argumentative circularity is one way to escape providing reasons, through argumentation, for one's religious convictions**.** If it is successfully demonstrated that presuppositionalists embrace fallacious circularity then a major blow has been dealt to their methodology.

   Vicious and virtuous circles. Here it is vital to distinguish between two types of circularity: vicious and virtuous. In the majority of the literature, circular reasoning and begging the question are presented as synonymous, with no distinctions made regarding different types of circularity. Among analytical philosophers and epistemologists there is a lively discussion[26] over 1) the validity of epistemic circularity, and 2) whether all forms of circular reasoning should be equated with the fallacy of *petitio principii*. Walton notes that question-begging is a fallacy because it "… prevent[s] the raising of further critical questions by an opponent in relation to one's argument in persuasion dialogue."[27] But not all circles are fallacious, nor are they all vicious. Circular arguments are, as Walton puts it, "often quite correct and useful-not fallacious, as traditionally portrayed in the logic textbooks."[28] I speak of non-vicious circles as virtuous circles. Virtuous circularity occurs when consistency is maintained from the fundamental principles of one's method, through to the presentation and examination of supporting evidence, down to the concluding point. This I term *circular coherence*. Nicholas Rescher clarifies:

    The justificatory procedure at issue is then indeed circular-the validated logic we achieve in the end should ideally turn out to encompass the very logic of which

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[25] R. C. Sproul, John H. Gerstner, and Arthur W. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 322.

[26] Cf. William P. Alston, "Epistemic Circularity*," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1986): 47:1-30, Roy Sorenson, "P Therefore P, Without Circularity," *The Journal of Philosophy* 88 (1991): 245-266, Michael Bergmann, "Epistemic Circularity: Malignant and Benign," http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~bergmann/epistemic%20circularity.htm, Accessed 8/14/09.

[27] Walton, *Begging the Question*, 311.

[28] Douglas N.Walton, "Informal Fallacies," *Blackwell Companion to Epistemology.*

we have been making presystematic use. But there is nothing vicious or vitiating at work here; it is a matter of retrospective wisdom-of-hindsight reassessment, of revisiting something familiar to reconsider it from a different point of view…In this way the validation of the modes of argumentation that constitute our logic is a process that is –to reemphasize- *virtuously circular*. We would not-should not-want it otherwise. Circularity in this domain is not just unavoidable but actually desirable…In the validation of modes of argumentation, circularity is not something vicious or vitiating; it is a rational *sine qua non.*[29]

This citation is of particular interest because Rescher is not (to my knowledge) a Christian, and thus has no stake in the ongoing discussion over apologetic method.

Having differentiated between vicious and virtuous circularity, we can ask whether presuppositionalists embrace question-begging. Van Til and his followers have endorsed a brand of circularity. But do they endorse the fallacy of *petitio principii*? Recall that vicious circles "evade [fulfilling] a legitimate burden of proof." Traditional apologists often believe that presuppositionalists do precisely this largely because of a misreading of the *pre* in presuppositionalism, taking it to mean an arbitrarily posited axiom[30] rather than an epistemological precondition for intelligible discourse.

Clarifying statements. The statements provided earlier can lead one to think Van Tillians encourage question begging. While they do not do so explicitly, taken in isolation, one can understand such widespread confusion and misunderstanding. As these statements are worded it seems as if the authors take a presuppositional stance in order to avoid evidential priority. Here I distinguish between statements of qualified and unqualified embrace of circularity. As the distinction implies, the latter are statements made by Van Til and others that embrace circularity but do not distinguish between the fallacious and the felicitous. The former do provide such clarifying qualifications. The following quotes provide what I believe to be the proper interpretive matrix for such unqualified statements.

- We hold it to be true that circular reasoning is the only reasoning that is possible to finite man. The method of implication as outlined above is circular reasoning. Or we may call it spiral reasoning. We must go round and round a thing to see of its dimensions and to know more about it, in general, unless we are larger than that which we are investigating. Unless we are larger than God we cannot reason about Him by any other way, than by a transcendental or circular argument. The refusal to admit the necessity of circular reasoning is itself an evident token of Antitheism. *Reasoning in a vicious circle is the only alternative to reasoning in a circle.*[31]

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[29] Nicholas Rescher, *Cognitive Pragmatism: The Theory of Knowledge in Pragmatic Perspective* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 143. Emphasis in original. My thanks to James Anderson for bringing this reference to my attention.

[30] Cf. Ibid., 326, 328-329. There seems to be a confusion here between the presuppositionalism of Cornelius Van Til (for whom this objection does not apply), and that of Gordon Clark (for whom it does). For a correction of this error, see John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, 136-139.

[31] Cornelius Van Til, *The Metaphysics of Apologetics* (Unpublished Class Syallabus, 1932), 24. Emphasis added.

- Van Til never suggested that anyone should commit the logical fallacy of begging the question (e.g. "A is true because A is true."). That would be strange indeed. In reality, he frequently called attention to the failure of such arguments. It is true that Van Til spoke positively of "circular reasoning," but he had something other than begging the question in mind. He was not talking so much about argumentation, setting down a convincing case that leads to a conclusion. *In argumentation, reasoning should be linear.* Instead, Van Til spoke of circularity in terms of the inescapable process by which finite minds attain knowledge to be used in arguments…*This is the kind of circularity or spiraling that Van Til pointed out in all human reasoning. It has nothing to do with begging the question.*[32]

- The "circularity" of a transcendental argument is not at all the same as the *fallacious* "circularity" of an argument in which the conclusion is a restatement (in one form or another) of one of the premises. Rather, it is the circularity involved in a coherent theory (where all the parts are consistent with or assume each other) and which is required when one reasons about a precondition for reasoning.[33]

Van Tillians, at least implicitly, distinguish between circular coherence and begging the question, embracing the former and rejecting the latter. R. C. Sproul himself, one of the three authors of *Classical Apologetics*, sees no problem with Van Til's point. Sproul says, "That all reasoning is ultimately circular in the sense that conclusions are inseparably related to presuppositions is not in dispute."[34] John Frame sheds further light on the type of circularity embraced.[35] First, theologically, Christians have no alternative than to reason under the lordship of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3). Second, circularity "in a system is properly justified *only* at one point: in an argument for the ultimate criterion of the system."[36] Lastly, Frame makes the distinction between broad and narrow circles. An example of a narrow circle is "Scripture is the word of God because Scripture is the word of God." Narrow circularity is non-persuasive in apologetic dialogue. Broad circularity offers more data, including archaeology, history, philosophy, etc., but still interprets such data in ways consistent with the biblical worldview. With these considerations in mind the following questions may be raised: Should we consider an argument viciously circular that only incorporates premises that comport with its ultimate criterion of veracity? If so, what is

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[32] Richard L. Pratt, *Common Misunderstandings of Van Til's Apologetics*, Part 2. http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/ric_pratt/TH.Pratt.VanTil.2.html. Emphasis added. Accessed 9/19/09.
[33] Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*, 518, n. 122. Emphasis added
[34] *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2005), 70.
[35] This discussion, along with other comments by Frame, can be found in *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 130-131. Clarifying the logic behind the Van Tillian embrace of circular coherence, Frame proposed an explicitly linear relationship between faith and reason. As he states it: God's rationality → human faith → human rationality (where the arrow means "is the grounds for"). See, his article, "Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan, 216. There is progress here, not a series of circles while standing in place. Unfortunately, neither the contributors to *Five Views on Apologetics*, critical reviewers , nor recent apologetic works from the traditional camp have reformulated their critiques to take into account Frame's presentation.
[36] *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 130.

the alternative? If we were to argue in some other way would not such arguments be inconsistent and therefore destroy its claims to validity?

Van Til equates circular argument with presuppositional, indirect, or *transcendental*[37] reasoning. A transcendental argument is, as Craig defines it, "an argument for a reality based on that reality's being the very conditions even of a denial of that reality."[38] Van Til defines a transcendental argument as one that "takes any fact of experience which it wishes to investigate, and tries to determine what the presuppositions of such a fact must be, in order to make it what it is."[39] In fact, when we grasp the centrality of transcendental reasoning to Van Til's approach both Scylla and Charybdis are laid to rest. First, Van Til advocated the transcendental *argument* for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. This fact rules out fideism. Second, "transcendental reasoning [focuses] on necessary enabling conditions either of coherent experience or the possession or employment of some kind of knowledge or cognitive ability, where the opponent is not in a position to question the fact of this experience [or] knowledge… and where the revealed preconditions include what the opponent questions."[40]

Here an example may serve us well. According to presuppositionalism, the existence of God is the necessary "enabling condition" for coherent experience. The apologist, if she is speaking to a materialist, may point out that the laws of logic are essential to rational interchange, universally applicable, and are not mere social conventions (since a denial of the law of non-contradiction would imply there's no difference between atheism and Christianity.) Likewise, they are immaterial, constant, and reflect a thinking mind more than non-thinking matter. The anti-theist opponent is "not in a position to question the validity" of logical argumentation (granted they have entered into a debate). Now it is the job of the presuppositionalist to demonstrate that the "revealed preconditions" of discourse include what the anti-theist questions[41], namely the existence of God. This approach is taken not to avoid bearing the weight of evidential priority, but makes the surprising claim that Christian theism, and *only Christian theism,* is able to sufficiently shoulder the burden of proof, escaping the accusation of begging the question.

Fideism

I will now specifically address the charge of fideism in two ways: First, by way of rebuttal, then, by way of refutation. Rebuttal is needed to demonstrate that the case against presuppositionalism fails to prove its point successfully. The refutation demonstrates the allegation as false.

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[37] K. Scott Oliphant notes that, "Van Til's indirect method moves one out of the context of a direct argument and into the context of the *rationale* of any fact or law assumed to be, or to be true. Thus, circularity is inextricably linked to the transcendental approach and is not meant to be in reference, strictly speaking, to direct argumentation." Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th Ed, ed. K. Scott Oliphant (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 123n8. Emphasis in the original.

[38] "A Classical Apologist's Response," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan, 232.

[39] Van Til, quoted in John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, 311-312.

[40] "Transcendental arguments," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: http://www.iep.utm.edu/trans-ar/. Accessed 9/19/09.

[41] This is the method adopted by Greg Bahnsen in his debate with Gordon Stein over the existence of God. http://www.bellevuechristian.org/faculty/dribera/htdocs/PDFs/Apol_Bahnsen_Stein_Debate_Transcript.pdf , accessed 11/10/09. Note especially the exchange on pages 10 and 11.

The difficulty of definition. Earlier I mentioned that the allegation of fideism is both imprecise and inaccurate. Starting with the imprecision of the allegations, several notions may be assigned to the terms faith and reason. Reason can be defined in one of at least four ways.[42] Reason may be defined as the human capacity for evaluating concepts (R1), as a human faculty independent of other faculties-such as the will and the emotions (R2), or as a faculty independent of presuppositional commitments (R3). The second and third definitions are related. While R2 sees reason as autonomous from other human faculties, R3 is autonomous from an individual's worldview. Fourth, reason (R4) may be thought of as man's ability to think, *simpliciter*. Similarly, faith may be defined in a number of ways. It may be defined as trust in the person, work, and words of Jesus Christ and his apostles (F1), the capacity to believe something based upon insufficient or no evidence (F2), or as a synonym for intellectual assent (F3).

R1	The human capacity for evaluating concepts	F1	Personal trust in the person, work, and words of Jesus Christ and his apostles
R2	A human faculty independent of other faculties-such as the will and the emotions	F2	The capacity to believe something based upon insufficient or no evidence
R3	A faculty independent of presuppositional (worldview) commitments	F3	Intellectual assent
R4	Man's ability to think, *simpliciter*		

What should be observed is that fideism[43] results only when *incompatible* conceptions of faith and reason are paired. Presuppositionalists and most other Christian apologists dismiss the definition of reason in terms of R4 since it is simplistic. Likewise, R2 and R3 seem to fall short of the holism presented in Scripture[44] and are reminiscent of a Platonic anthropology. As we turn to the definitions of faith, F2 becomes immediately suspect. While many opponents of Christianity define faith this way, it seems more like credulity than anything the Bible presents as faith.[45]

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[42] Paul Helm in *Faith and Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4-10, makes a similar point by distinguishing between several definitions of these terms. He notes that reason can be defined as 1) the rules of logical inference, 2) the accumulated wisdom of a tradition, and 3) shorthand for what is reasonable. Likewise, he points out that faith maybe be conceived as evidence-sensitive, evidence-insensitive (i.e. faith as something not open to investigation, a leap, and a risk), cognitive and non-cognitive.

[43] Here I am adopting the definition of fideism as irrational or arational belief.

[44] Cf. John M. Frame, *Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 361-382.

[45] This is the common definition of religious faith presented in the works of the New Atheists. By way of contrast, the historic three-fold definition of faith against reason leaves us nothing to reconcile, since there is no tension is presented between faith and reason. J. P. Moreland notes, "Throughout church history, theologians have expressed three different aspects of biblical faith: *notitia* (knowledge), *fiducia* (trust), and *assensus* (assent). *Notitia* refers to the data or doctrinal content of the Christian faith (see Jude 1:3). *Assensus* denotes the assent of the intellect to the truth of the content of Christian teaching. Note that each of these aspects of faith requires a careful exercise of reason, both in understanding what the teachings of Christianity are and in judging their truthfulness. In this way, reason is indispensable for the third aspect of

Not only are faith and reason defined in a multiplicity of ways, so also is the central term of our discussion, fideism. Some understand the term to refer to a subjectivist theory of justification, while others maintain that it is a "negation of rational constructions."[46] C. Stephen Evans defines fideism as, "…the idea…that faith should not be governed or regulated by reason, where reason is understood to be an autonomous, relatively competent human faculty. The fideist says rather that faith must be accepted as at least partly autonomous or independent of reason, or even that reason must in some ways be corrected by or be made subservient to faith."[47] Given the qualifications provided, I am curious as to the identity of those who would disagree with this definition. If no examples can be produced, then the bar is set too high, and notable classical apologists like Norman Geisler, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland could well be reckoned as fideists! Craig, for example, follows Martin Luther in his distinction between the ministerial and magisterial uses of reason[48], defining the latter in a way that looks very close to what a Van Tillian would call "autonomous." Thus, the fact that presuppositionalists reject a spurious definition of reason, as does Craig, is no grounds for labeling them fideists.

When reason is defined as independent of other human faculties, presuppositions, and spiritual appetites, Van Til objects. Likewise, he protests when faith is thought in terms of credulity or irrational/arational belief. When the relation between faith and reason is conceived in terms of human beings applying their God-given cognitive equipment to the message of the Bible, examining its propositions[49], and believing its promises, he sees no tension between the two. Yet, without specifying their definitions of faith and reason, objectors to presuppositionalism unwittingly appeal to vague connotation, rather than substantial argument. Van Til cannot rightly be called a fideist on the ground that he opposes faith and reason. Rather he rejects a *particular combination* of several possible definitions for these terms.

Secondly, other than being imprecise, to charge of fideism is simply false. *Van Til was in diametric opposition to fideism*. In contrasting Abraham Kuyper's rejection of apologetics with B. B. Warfield's insistence on the rational defensibility of Christian theism, Van Til concludes, "to the extent that Warfield differs on this point with Kuyper…he has done great service for Christian apologetics."[50] Moreover, he states, "there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism." Furthermore, "the Reformed apologist maintains that there is an absolutely valid argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christian theism." One may question the validity of these statements, but the point remains that the "proof" for

faith — *fiducia* — which captures the personal application of trust involved in faith, an act that primarily involves the will but includes the affection and intellect too." *Love God with all Your Mind* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 1997), 60.

[46] R. C. Sproul, "Fideism," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, vol. 4, ed. Philip E. Hughes and George R. Jeffray, quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 72-73.

[47] *Faith Beyond Reason,* 9.

[48] "Classical Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan, 36-37. Craig makes this distinction in regard to "knowing Christianity is true," not "showing" it to be true. I doubt in "showing" as opposed to "knowing," Craig would approve of the magisterial use of reason.

[49] Cf. Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology, 2nd ed.* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed), chapter 4.

[50] *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, N.J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 243.

Christianity is "absolutely certain," and the "argument" for Christian theism is "absolutely valid." For Van Til, "faith is not blind faith."[51] In an ironic twist, according to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia,* semifideism is the belief "which holds that man reaches truth by reason, but with probability only and not with certitude." According to this definition, those in the traditional camp are closer to fideists than Van Tillians![52]

The Traditional method asserts that Christianity is the *best* handling of the relevant evidence, but Van Til insists that it is the *only* acceptable conclusion. "The Christian's position is not merely just as good as the non-Christian's position. Christianity is the *only* position that does not *per se* take away the very foundation for intelligible scientific and philosophical procedure. Christianity is the only rational faith!"[53] While I'm not defending this claim here, I am highlighting the fact that Van Til's position is the opposite of what is commonly charged. One may accuse him with possibly over-valuing the rational credentials of Christianity, but it cannot fairly be said that he *under*-valued them.[54]

Conclusion

In summary, we have noted the twin challenges to a presuppositional method. I have reviewed Van Til's position as presented in opposing literature, in the words of sympathetic interpreters, and in his own. Opponents have portrayed him as opposing the application of reason to divine revelation by eschewing rational discourse and evidential appeals. Likewise, presuppositionalists are often charged with holding to a methodology that is based on an elementary error in critical thinking. If fallacious circularity is built into the methodological DNA of presuppositionalism, this would aid in estabilishing the claim that it is fideistic. In response, we have examined the record and found both claims unsubstantiated. My contention is that these caricatures are based on either a lack of reading or a misreading of Van Til's overall project.

I made the distinction between vicious (fallacious) and virtuous (non-fallacious) forms of epistemic circularity, calling the latter *circular coherence*. The main distinguishing mark between these two forms of circularity is how one handles the burden of proof, or evidential priority. Since neither Van Til nor his disciples advocate the fallacy of *petitio principii,* or arguments such as "God exists because God exists," and instead equate presuppositional inquiry with transcendental reasoning, it is hard to understand why the charge of circularity persists.

Van Til *insisted* upon the rational demonstration of Christianity. He explicitly rejected fideism, with its problematic conceptions of faith and reason. In contrast, Van Til posits an "absolutely certain proof" for Christian theism. As Thom Notaro puts it, "The frequency with which Van Til defends the notion of proof is alarming compared to what

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[51] Ibid., 32.

[52] Cf. Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*, 76-77.

[53] Cornelius Van Til, quoted in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis*, 116.

[54] Greg Bahnsen's words further refute the fideism charge: "God wishes for us to be rational: *to exercise and improve our reasoning ability* in understanding, propounding and defending the truths of Scripture...The kind of rationality or reasoning that we will employ in defending the Christian faith involves not only study of formal logic (patterns or abstract forms of inference), but also attention to informal fallacies in ordinary language, the use of inductive reasoning, the handling of empirical evidence in history, science, linguistics, etc., and especially reflection upon the demands of an adequate worldview in terms of which all such thinking makes sense." *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith* (Nacodoches: Covenant Media Press, 1996), 134-135. Emphasis in original.

one might expect."[55] He may have been mistaken, confused, or otherwise wrongheaded, but he was not a fideist. We've seen that these objections to his method fail both semantically and substantially. The refutation of the first allegation is strong grounds for the refutation of the second. In the spirit of Christian charity and academic responsibility we must recognize that the correlation between presuppositionalism and fideism cannot fairly be laid at Van Til's feet. Neither Van Til, nor his disciples, endorses question-begging or blind faith.

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[55] *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillpsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 65.