

Gauch's "Gotchas"

Protestant *Principia* and the Problem with Public Presuppositions

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In a recent *Philosophia Christi* article, Hugh G. Gauch, Jr., argues that “public presuppositions, derived from the rudimentary common sense shared by Christianity and virtually all other worldviews, suffice to defend major tenets of Christianity, including Jesus’s resurrection.”¹

Throughout this article, ambiguities abound, and it is not possible to cover them all. It is difficult to know, for example, exactly what Gauch means by “presupposition.” Given its importance in his article, and the varied uses extant, one would have hoped for some specificity as to its use in the article. How, we could ask, are such presuppositions themselves “derived from the rudimentary common sense”? Does that mean they are derived from other beliefs that we hold? Wouldn’t that make commonsense beliefs the presuppositions? Or does “the rudimentary common sense” produce the presuppositions? If so, are presuppositions identical with our basic beliefs? And just what *is* “the” rudimentary common sense, in the first place? Is it as “common” for Gauch as it is for a Hindu, or a Christian scientist, or a Buddhist? Is it only “common” for Western scientists? Instead of commenting on all of the ambiguities and generalities in the article, which would take an abundance of space and time, I will stick to the three problems—Gauch’s “gotchas”—that Gauch sees in a Covenantal apologetic approach.

ABSTRACT: In a recent article in *Philosophia Christi*, Hugh G. Gauch, Jr., argues for the necessity of “public presuppositions” for Christian apologetics. In the course of his argument, he critiques three tenets of my approach, as given in my book, *Covenantal Apologetics*. Though all three objections have been lodged and answered in numerous places, I respond to Gauch by arguing that the three tenets are embedded in and consistent with the theology that came out of the Reformation. Thus, I conclude that our apologetic differences have their roots in our theological differences.

1. Thanks to *Philosophia Christi* for alerting me to the recent article by Hugh G. Gauch, Jr., “Public Presuppositions for Christian Apologetics,” *Philosophia Christi* 17 (2015): 189–98, and for requesting a response.

In his article, Gauch notes three specific problems with a Reformed approach to apologetics (called by me a “Covenantal” approach, by others, “Presuppositionalism”). The three problems he locates in my book, *Covenantal Apologetics*, are (1) circular reasoning, (2) starting points, and (3) neutral rationality. More specifically, Gauch is (1) troubled by the notion of circular reasoning in a Covenantal apologetic approach; (2) he argues that we all start with commonsense beliefs, rather than with God’s revelation; and (3) he thinks that a verdict on the supposed neutrality of rationality must be three-sided, not one-sided.

The difficulty with an article like this is two-fold. First, as noted, the ambiguity and generality of the discussion requires substantial critique at almost every point, and from the outset. Because terms, concepts and ideas are either not defined, or are ambiguous, there is confusion from the start. Second, and following on the first, because the article is content to stir up a little dust without disturbing the ground, much of the discussion, because it only skims the surface, completely misses its intended mark.

Along with the frustration of superficiality, there is the added aggravation that Gauch’s gotchas have been addressed in great detail by Reformed theologians and apologists. Thus, someone who still sees them as problematic is duty-bound, in a published article like this, not simply to repeat the same well-worn mantras, but to indicate why the multitude of answers and arguments that have been given to the problems are still insufficient.

Since the opportunity has presented itself again, however, it might be helpful at least to respond, with some elaboration, in light of the multitude of answers already given to objections like Gauch’s gotchas. The hope is that a response might ensure that such superficial charges be assessed in light of the plethora of responses already out there so that, if objections are raised again, they would be raised with the depth and understanding that recognizes those responses, and sees in them the foundational tenets of a purely Protestant theology.

It would be best, I think, to begin with Gauch’s second gotcha. With this problem, as with the other two, what should be immediately recognized, though it is often not seen, is that the problems he sees are, at root, *theological*. The problems are not, in the first place, philosophical, and certainly not simply methodological. The latter two will always depend on the theological roots, or lack thereof, of the problems mentioned.

With respect to the starting point, Gauch doesn’t appear to recognize the difference, in theology and apologetic discussion, between a starting point and a *principium*. Theological *principia*, while they ground whatever starting point we choose, are not always *identical* with our apologetic starting points. Cornelius Van Til explains it this way:

Since, then, the absolute self-consciousness of God is the final interpreter of all facts, man’s knowledge is analogical of God’s knowledge.

Since all the finite facts exist by virtue of the interpretation of God, man's interpretation of the finite facts is ultimately dependent upon God's interpretation of the facts. Man cannot, except to his own hurt, look at the facts without looking at God's interpretation of the facts. Man's knowledge of the facts is then a reinterpretation of God's interpretation. It is this that is meant by saying that man's knowledge is analogical of God's knowledge.

When we approach the question in this way we should be willing to start anywhere and with any fact that any person we meet is interested in. The very conviction that there is not a single fact that can really be known unless it is interpreted theistically gives us this liberty to start anywhere, as far as a proximate starting point is concerned. If we thought that the fact of God's existence had no significance for physics, we would have to seek to bring our opponents at once into contact with the more specifically religious problem. But that is exactly what we need not do.²

As for "starting point," then, we can start, proximately, with any fact whatsoever; we can start with Gauch's "public" notions, or any other notion, in our apologetic discussion. But we do so properly when we recognize that our proximate starting point requires—*transcendentally requires*—the two *principia* of the (1) Christian God and (2) his revelation to us. Those *principia* must be our foundation. If not, then any other foundation is simply arbitrary and relative, including Gauch's *asserted* public, commonsense beliefs.

This problem is evident in Gauch's response to a revelational foundation. He says, with respect to my explanation of theological *principia* as taking precedence over any other foundation:

To the contrary, this objection misinterprets the modest ambitions of the recommended public presuppositions. [It is not clear how I could "misinterpret" something I had never read.] They merely *assert* that "the physical world is real and orderly and we humans find it substantially comprehensible," as Christianity and nearly all other worldviews agree, but they do not and need not *explain* why the world and humans are so constituted as they are. Such explanations should appear in Christian apologetics in the role of defended and public conclusions, rather than controversial and discriminatory presuppositions.³

It seems that Gauch thinks that public presuppositions merely assert, without explanation. What, then, is the *role* of these asserted presuppositions? Whatever their role, they cannot, by Gauch's definition, be what they are because of their foundation in the character and revelational activity of the Triune God. As asserted, and without needed explanation, they simply *are*, and their status, he thinks, is and must remain noncontroversial. But this no-

2. Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1969), accessed via Logos Bible Software (emphases added).

3. Hugh G. Gauch, Jr., "Public Presuppositions for Christian Apologetics," 195.

tion of asserted presuppositions, which need no explanation, is itself a highly controversial one.

Gauch goes on to say that, given the asserted presuppositions, the explanations needed “should appear in Christian apologetics in the role of defended and public conclusions, rather than controversial and discriminatory presuppositions.”⁴ Again, the language here is confusing (just what *is* a “public conclusion”?), but what Gauch wants to argue, it seems, is that, by virtue of *assertion*, everyone, or *almost* everyone, has public presuppositions, and that’s where most of us must stand in order, from there, to *argue* toward “defended and public conclusions” in apologetics.

One problem (among many) with this is that any argument that simply asserts commonsense beliefs, which themselves (or so he thinks) are in need of no explanation, will have an impossible time moving, with any consistency, from there to the “defended and public” conclusion of the Christian God. Since God and his revelation is the *reason* why there might be anything “common” in the first place, the mere assertion of such bare, assumed commonality excludes at the outset any conclusion that would properly affirm Him, because it denies the necessity of the proper foundation in His existence (as the *principium essendi*) and His revelation (as the *principium cognoscendi*).⁵

There is another fatal problem with Gauch’s thesis, a problem illustrated in George Marsden’s, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia.”⁶ In that article, Marsden attempts to show the historical progression in which scholarship has divorced itself from Christianity, beginning in the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. One of the key elements in this downward progression was the adoption, as well as the consequent failure, in Evangelical apologetics, of Thomas Reid’s common-sense philosophy, which is the philosophy with which Gauch’s notion of public presuppositions is coincident. The primary reason for this failure of “common sense,” according to Marsden, was that it was never able to provide a ground, or foundation, for its most basic principles; it was never able to give an adequate account of its understanding of “common sense” itself. Gauch, with his unilateral notion of the *assertion* of common sense may think no such account is needed, or at least if it *is* needed, it can only be pursued *on the basis of* these assertions. But the reality is that such assertions *themselves*, unless they are able to shoulder the epistemological weight of foundational *principia*, need some

4. Ibid.

5. For an example of one who “starts with” Gauch’s supposed common beliefs and argues for a *denial* of a successful natural theology, as well as evidential theistic arguments, see Herman Philipse, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

6. George Marsden, “The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia,” in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

kind of rationale, especially when it is recognized (as it will inevitably be) that commonality is not so common as one might have hoped.

An apologetic with its roots in common sense (for example, public presuppositions) means that one would begin one's defense with the "immediate, non-inferential beliefs . . . as Reid proposed, such as the existence of the self, the existence of other personal and rational beings, the existence of the material world, the relationship of cause and effect, the continuity of past and present." These were called, by Reid, "principles of common-sense,"⁷ and, ambiguities aside, overlap with Gauch's notion of public presuppositions. In defending Christianity, those who adopted this commonsense approach began by attempting to show how the basic truths and principles of Christianity could fit within the already asserted truths of common sense (that is, Gauch's public presuppositions).

Without reproducing Marsden's penetrating article, we should note carefully his analysis of the failure of the commonsense approach. Charles Hodge, for example, (following Reid) remarked in stating his assumptions that commonsense truths were "given in the constitution of our nature." Having been so purposely designed, they could be relied on with perfect security. Reid himself argued that it is possible to establish once for all a universal code of agreed-upon common-sense principles.⁸ So, asserted Hodge, the design of nature was assumed to involve the creation of a single universal human nature. Hence the presumption made by Hodge and others was that commonsense principles were universal and unalterable, and thus provided an adequate *principium* for apologetics. So also with Gauch.

But there are serious problems with this assumption, noted by Marsden. For example, Marsden notes that when Darwinism came on the scene, one of its most serious challenges was that it could retain its evolutionary principle without recourse to theism. The problem was not so much that Darwinism needed atheism, which would have been easier (because more explicit) to deal with apologetically, but rather Darwinism needed only agnosticism. In other words, it was not that Darwinism had to contend, "There is no God, but there is design," but only, "we see design in everything, though we are not sure whether or not God exists," which is far less radical (and thus more challenging) than blatant atheism. So Darwinism challenged Christian theism's contention of the certainty of God's existence by postulating agnosticism along with a thesis for design.

Tragically, those wedded to common sense could only respond by positing that Darwin's position excluded an intelligent Designer (which was all too obvious even to need asserting).⁹ As Marsden points out, all that Hodge (for example) could do in the face of Darwinism was *assert* that large parts

7. *Ibid.*, 235.

8. *Ibid.*, 243.

9. *Ibid.*, 243–4.

of the population still believed in an intelligent Designer. What, then, would happen to this “defense” when the next generation would show belief in an intelligent Designer to be far from “common”? And wouldn’t such a shift explicitly demonstrate the variability, and thus the relativity, of the notion of common sense itself? What happens when “public presuppositions” shift and move?

Most damaging to the philosophy of common sense (according to Marsden) was that the fatal blow to its use was demonstrated in the nineteenth century in the apologetic responses to the introduction of Darwinism. The fatal blow is summarized by Marsden in this way: “Common sense could not settle a dispute over what was a matter of common sense.”¹⁰ Mere assertion of common sense cannot and will not suffice as a *principium*; some kind of rationale must be given, especially when what is “common” is shifting and moving, always up for debate.

One of the reasons for this failure of “public presuppositions” is that commonsense beliefs were thought to function, as in Gauch’s proposal, as *principia*, that is, basic and fundamental principles of knowledge itself. But it was “common” knowledge that commonsense beliefs were only generally common and *not absolutely so*. Therefore, there were no sufficient, universal criteria by which to determine which views were and which were not common sense. Or, to say it another way, since these beliefs were thought to be on the level of *principia*, there was no way to give a rationale for such commonsense beliefs; they were supposed to carry the weight of providing the rationale for everything else. But such a weight proved so heavy that the proposed foundation collapsed.

It may be that Gauch is in good company in his confusion of *principia* and public presuppositions. Realism of some kind (for example, “common,” or “critical”) may be the default position for many Christians. But even if so, what is owed to those critiqued is an understanding and interaction of the Reformed view of *principia*, and the distinctions requisite in such a view.¹¹ A mere *assertion* of public presuppositions is only as authoritative as the one(s) asserting, and even if a multitude assert it, it can still carry only relative weight, and only in certain contexts (surely postmodern/post-Evangelical epistemology has taught us this much). Gauch’s “public presuppositions” are trapped within a given community of “believers,” and are thus bound to a relativistic, postmodern, epistemology.

Principia, on the other hand, when theologically and biblically grounded, can carry the weight of any and everything else, given their properly

10. *Ibid.*, 244.

11. See, e.g., Herman Bavinck, John Bolt, and John Vriend, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 207–12; Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to Ca. 1725*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 432–50.

foundational status.¹² They can do this because they are not dependent on one's set of beliefs. They function at the *principlial* level, whether one believes them or not. Thus, they are, unlike Gauch's notion, *both* universal *and* infallible. The *principia* of Protestantism are not dependent on my, or anyone else's, beliefs; they have their authority objectively in God alone.

It is also unclear why "controversial and discriminatory presuppositions" should be ruled out of bounds in the first place, as Gauch proposes. Isn't the fact that, in any debate, there is disagreement, proof enough that there are controversial and discriminatory presuppositions at work from the start? Maybe not, for Gauch, since his use of the term "presupposition" remains opaque. But there is nothing illogical or otherwise intellectually illicit in beginning an apologetic discussion, if needed, with controversial presuppositions. That's how many discussions get going in the first place. And, as we noted above, because one can start anywhere in an apologetic discussion, what is most important is that, wherever one starts, the foundation never shifts. It remains and informs the discussion at every point. Only the *principia* that God provides can accomplish the "commonality" that Gauch wants. Such commonality is not necessarily resident in our beliefs, but it functions there, in every case, regardless.

Second, Gauch complains about circular reasoning. He may be surprised to know that the utilization of circular reasoning is not unique to Covenantal, or Reformed, apologetics, but that it goes back, at least, to the Reformation itself. Here again there seems to be no awareness or understanding by Gauch of the Protestant notion of *principia*.

The reason the notion of circular reasoning came to the fore during the Reformation was because of the so-called formal cause of the Reformation—*sola scriptura*. For the Reformers, and thus for *Protestants* generally, when the matter of a *principium cognoscendi* was at issue, there were only two options. Either one will stand on the self-attesting authority of Scripture, or one will stand somewhere outside of Scripture in order, perhaps, to attempt, downstream, to affirm Scripture as authoritative.¹³ In the latter case, it is the "outside" authority that concludes for Scripture's authority, so the "outside" authority is, by definition, the *principium*; for Romanists, the church is the *principium* since it establishes the authority of its Bible. For Gauch, a person's "public" beliefs is the authority, as he seeks to ground his argument in what he, and others, might agree to be their presuppositions. For the Reformers, one either opts for Scripture (and God's general revelation) as *principium*, or one opts for man (which would include the church) as *principium*. There is no third alternative.

12. For another extended discussion of the problems with an epistemology that purports to be grounded in some kind of realism, see K. Scott Oliphint, "Bavinck's Realism, the Logos Principle and *Sola Scriptura*," *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2010): 359–90.

13. See, e.g., the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.4.

When the Reformed theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) argued for Scripture as foundational (*principium*), he received a response (as we might expect) from a Romanist theologian, Martin Becanus, entitled, *The Calvinistic Circle*.¹⁴ In one of his disputations on the relationship of faith and reason, Voetius considers the fact of Scripture’s foundational (*principial*) status in light of the function of reason. He concludes: “No other principle or external means whatsoever that is distinct from Scripture and prior, superior (either in itself or with respect to us), more certain and better known, exists or can be invented that is suitable to certainly and infallibly demonstrate to us the authenticity and trustworthiness of Scripture, or to radiate by a clearer light than Scripture itself radiates.”¹⁵ Voetius goes on to reject the notion that anything else could provide credibility to the Bible as our basic foundation, primarily because anything else would assign ultimate credibility to “the testimony of man,” (that is, public presuppositions). In other words, to ground and found the credibility of the Bible on “common sense,” as Gauch proposes, is to assign ultimate credibility to that ground, instead of to Scripture, attempting to invest those “common” beliefs with *principial* status.

In light of his assertion of the foundational status of Scripture, Voetius was accused of circular reasoning. The Romanist objection to Voetius was this: “The circle of Calvinist theology . . . consists in first proving the Divine authority of the Bible by referring to the subjective testimony given by the Holy Spirit, and then attempting to prove that this inner acknowledgement comes indeed from the Spirit of God by referring to the Bible.”¹⁶

Voetius made a distinction between the objective *principium* of Scripture and the subjective *principium* of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. At no point—neither in the objective nor in the subjective *principia*—was he willing to allow “common sense” (or reason or external evidence) to have *principial* preeminence over the testimony of Scripture itself. Nothing but Scripture can argue Scripture’s status. In that way, God’s own revelation must be the foundation (*principium*) for anything else that we rightly believe or know, and for anything else that we argue.¹⁷

14. Most of the following material on Gisbertus Voetius and John Owen beginning with this paragraph is reproduced from my online article, <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/around-and-around-we-go.php>. See that article for a deeper discussion. See Aza Goudriaan, *Reformed Orthodoxy and Philosophy, 1625–1750: Gisbertus Voetius, Petrus Van Mastricht, and Anthony Driessen*, ed. Wim Janse (Boston: Brill, 2006), 47.

15. Quoted in *ibid.*, 45–6.

16. *Ibid.*, 46. Notice that this kind of circular reasoning, so reproachful to Gauch, is embedded in the Protestant theology that opposes Roman Catholicism.

17. As Richard Muller notes, “the classical philosophical language of *principia* was appropriated by the Reformed orthodox at a time and in a context where . . . [it] served the needs both of the Reformation sense of the priority of Scripture and the Reformation assumptions concerning the ancillary status of philosophy and the weakness of human reason. By defining both Scripture and God as *principial* in the strictest sense—namely as true, immediate, necessary, and knowable . . . —the early orthodox asserted the priority of Scripture over tradition and reason and gave conceptual status to the notion of its self-authenticating character in response

John Owen (1616–1683) engaged in a similar discussion. In speaking of the reason why men must believe the Scriptures to be the Word of God, Owen refers us to the formal object of Scripture.¹⁸ For Owen, there is a distinction between the formal object and the material object of our faith. Whereas the formal object of our faith deals with the *reason* why we believe, the material object deals with *what* we believe, that is, the actual things which are revealed to us.

This is a needed and helpful distinction. It is sometimes argued that affirming Scripture as our foundational presupposition must include an affirmation of the Trinity, or of substitutionary atonement, or, in Gauch's case, of an entire "worldview." This is to confuse the formal and the material objects of faith as it relates to our apologetic.

In dealing, therefore, with the *reason* for faith, Owen concentrates on the formal object. The sole reason why, the ground whereon, we are to believe the things revealed in Scripture (which, remember, is the material object) is by the evidence of Scripture alone. Owen is never afraid to give a reason for this most basic belief. He is quick, contrary to the understanding of Gauch, to show that there is indeed evidence for the authority of Scripture, but such evidence is in the Scripture itself.

Owen makes a further distinction under the rubric of the formal object of faith. He does not simply state that Scripture is what it is because of what it is, but he goes on to affirm that Scripture is what it is because of who *God* is. Here he begins to broaden his circle. Owen says that the reason we must believe the Bible to be the Word of God is because of the authority and veracity of God Himself.

Owen has at least two formal reasons for believing Scripture to be God's Word. He speaks of the authority and veracity of God as the ultimate reason or the ultimate formal object of our faith, whereas the Scripture itself is the first, immediate formal object of our faith. (Here Owen shows the inextricable link between what is called the *principium essendi*—the foundation of existence—and the *principium cognoscendi*—the foundation of knowledge.)

The relevance of this to our discussion of the supposed problem of circularity is that Owen, too, was charged (by the "Papists") with circular reasoning. His response to the charge was ingenious:

"We cannot," say the Papists . . . , "know the Scripture to be the word of God by the testimony of the Spirit. For either it is public testimony, which is that of the church" (and if this be granted they have enough); "or it is private testimony. But then," they say, "it will follow, 1.that our faith in the Scripture is enthusiasm. 2.That if the private testimony of the Spirit be questioned; it cannot be proved but by the Scripture;

to both Roman polemicists and philosophical skeptics of the era" (*Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:432 (emphases added)).

18. This discussion can be found in John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: T&T Clark), 4:16–20.

and so the Scripture being proved by the Spirit, and the Spirit again by the Scripture, we shall run in a round, which is no lawful way of arguing.”¹⁹

Is it the case that this Reformed view of Scripture consigns one to “run in a round?” Owen had an answer to such a charge. First of all, the Scriptures are testified to publicly and not just internally. If it is public presuppositions that Gauch is after, Owen has a ready, and *Protestant*, response. Such a public testimony is given, not by the church, nor by man, but by the Holy Spirit. Owen will readily admit that men will only concede the authority of Scripture when the Holy Spirit applies that which is *public testimony* to the hearts of men. Owen then makes another helpful and biblical distinction:

For if I be asked, how I know the Scripture to be the Word of God; this question may have a double sense: for either it is meant of the power and virtue whereby I believe; and then I answer, By the power and efficiency of the Spirit of God, opening the eyes of my understanding, and enabling me to believe;—or it is meant of the medium or *argument made use of*, and by which, as a motive, I am drawn to believe; and then I answer, Those impressions of divinity the Spirit hath left on the word, and by which he witnesseth it to be of God, are the *argument or motive persuading me* to believe.²⁰

Here Owen makes a distinction between that which enables the Christian to believe, and that which is the objective cause or argument causing the Christian to believe. It is the latter, according to Owen, the motive of belief, that cannot be attributed to the internal work of God the Holy Spirit. The motive of our faith must be, not the Spirit’s internal testimony as the Romanists assume, *but the “evidences of divinity” that we see in Scripture itself, through the Spirit’s enlightening us.*

In other words, Owen believes his argument to be more reasonable and “evidential” than the argument of the Romanists. As a matter of fact, Owen goes on to argue that it is the Romanist who reasons in a circle and that the circle is in fact a noose! He argues that Rome is caught between two different motives of faith, neither of which can prove the other without at the same time contradicting itself as the motive of faith:

And, indeed, they do plainly run into a circle, in their proving the Scripture by the authority of the church and the authority of the church again by the Scripture; for with them the authority of the church is the motive or argument, whereby they prove the divine authority of the Scripture, and that again is the motive or argument, by which they prove the authority of the church. And so both the church and the Scripture are more known than each other, and yet less, too: more

19. *Ibid.*, 8:524.

20. *Ibid.*, 8:526.

known, because they prove each other; and less known, because they are proved by each other.²¹

This circular “noose” would hold not simply for Romanists, but for anyone who joins Romanism in its rejection of circular reasoning, as does Gauch, in favor of some other, presumed to be universal, *principium*; their methods are one and the same. Once one defers foundational *principia* to something other than God and his revelation, then the “something else” is thought to be its own foundation and can only refer to itself as its own authority.²² All that is left is mere *assertion*. This is the case with Gauch’s notion of common sense and of public presuppositions.

There are other serious issues with Gauch’s arguments against circular reasoning. Among such issues is his admission that arguments for and against the Bible’s authority, or for and against the resurrection of Christ, consign the Christian to the *probability* of their conclusions. But any Christian who is content with a probability argument for the Bible’s authority, or for Christ’s resurrection is, at the same time, unaware of the quicksand upon which such probable arguments depend. It is impossible, without an arbitrary shift of *principia*, consistently to move from a probable resurrection to a biblical view of Christ’s resurrection.²³ And a shift of *principia* is not like moving from one room in a house to another room. It is rather like moving in and settling down in one house, resting upon its own foundation, only to jump up and plead later on that the house is insufficient to support itself and it is now requisite to attempt, arbitrarily, to jump to another house. Anyone in the house listening to such a plea would rightly question the rationality, and authority, of the one making the plea.

Finally, Gauch sees a problem with my rejection of “neutral rationality.” After noting that, according to a Covenantal apologetic, a notion of neutral rationality is beholden to Enlightenment thinking, Gauch avers,

To the contrary, a single verdict about rationality’s neutrality is inadequate. Rather, rationality or argumentation requires resources of three kinds (presuppositions, evidence, and logic), so three verdicts are needed. These verdicts are that *presuppositions* and *logic* should be nondiscriminatory or “neutral,” whereas *evidence* should be dis-

21. *Ibid.*, 8:527.

22. As I said, this topic has been addressed and answered numerous times, though objectors seem to be completely ignorant of the Reformed roots and responses to the objection. For more on this, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, 458ff., 581ff., 597ff. Almost any publication of Van Til’s would address this issue. See, e.g., Cornelius Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2008), chaps. 6–7. See also John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987), 130ff.; and Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton IL: Crossway, 2013), 39ff., 701ff.

23. For more on the problem of probability, see K. Scott Oliphint, “Is There a Reformed Objection to Natural Theology?,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 74 (2012): 196ff.

criminatory or “not neutral.” Recall that presuppositions and logic are needed to assert *any* of the hypotheses, so they are hypothesis nondiscriminatory.²⁴

As with the other two objections, this one could occupy us for some time. But, as with the other two, it would be helpful if objectors would recognize the deep, Reformed theological roots of the rejection of epistemological neutrality.

In this response from Gauch we see again that it is not clear what he means here by “presupposition.” Whatever it is, it looks to be significantly distinct from “logic” and from “evidence.” In any case, on what basis can Gauch assert that presuppositions and logic *should be* nondiscriminatory or “neutral?” Are we to trust him on this assertion? What’s the force of the “should be” in his assertion?

If evidence, on the other hand, is discriminatory, then it would appear that presuppositions and logic, as nondiscriminatory, are, at the same time, nonevidential. But then what is the status of public presuppositions? As nondiscriminatory, are they *nonevidential* as well? How could they be public without recourse to any evidence of their presumed “commonness?” And what is their relationship to logic? These questions go to the abstruse argumentation and use of terms that are replete throughout the article.

Akin to my rejection of neutral rationality, says Gauch, is my rejection of an independent natural theology: “Furthermore, although this note approves of natural theology, Oliphint’s rejection of neutral rationality leads to rejection of natural theology’s claim to function without dependence on an authoritative revelation.”²⁵ This, of course, is nothing but a Reformed view of natural theology; it was never thought to function independently of special revelation. Gauch calls for a reassessment of such claims in the context of a ramified natural theology. Here, perhaps, we can respond with an historical note in order to contextualize my complaint against neutral rationality:

The limited function of natural theology, therefore, never serves, in the orthodox systems, as a means of drawing supernatural revelation within the bounds of natural reason. The opposite is true of the Arminian systems: here we see a distinct effort to bring grace and Christian morality totally within the realm of nature and to create a bridge between Christian theology and philosophical rationalism.²⁶

In other words, the notion of a so-called neutral rationality is a distinctly Romanist and *Arminian* notion. It came about as a rejection of the Reformed notion of God and his revelation. It is an attempt to synthesize Christian theology with some kind of philosophical rationalism. This is in keeping with Gauch’s emphasis. In his methodology, it is the rational (that is, the

24. Gauch, “Public Presuppositions for Christian Apologetics,” 195.

25. *Ibid.*, 196.

26. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:309.

publicly “common”) first, then the revelational. The rational, so he supposes, is nondiscriminatory. This can only be the case if Arminian/Romanist theology is correct in its view of sin. It should be clear by this point that “Gauch’s Gotchas” are inextricably tied to *theological* differences, not methodological ones. Not only so, but, says Muller, “The development, in rationalist systems of the eighteenth century, of a *truly foundational natural theology* represents a basic alteration of perspective and a *loss*, not an outgrowth or further refinement, *of the orthodox system.*”²⁷ That is, the continued *assertion* of a neutral rationality that supposedly grounded natural theology served, historically, to undermine, pervert and distort orthodox Christianity.²⁸ A denial of Protestant *principia*, leads, if consistent, to a loss of Christian orthodoxy.

This loss of orthodoxy would be no less the case in a “ramified” natural theology. Appealing to biblical revelation as *only* historical, and nonauthoritative, can only produce, at best, some kind of probable conclusion. Such a conclusion contains the double poison of arguing, for example, that Christ *probably* rose from the dead (but, perhaps not)²⁹ and then of the necessity for an arbitrary leap to another foundation, as discussed above. Any time one’s argument assumes a neutral notion of rationality, a loss of orthodoxy is waiting in the wings, inevitably, if consistent, moving into the spotlight as it takes center stage at some historical moment.

This supposition of neutral rationality is in direct conflict with the Reformation, and, as with the rejection of circular reasoning, is comfortable only within a Romanist theology. Again, as Muller notes:

Whereas the medieval doctors had assumed that the fall affected primarily the will and its affections and *not the reason*, the Reformers assumed also the fallenness of the rational faculty: a generalized or “pagan” natural theology, according to the Reformers, was not merely limited to nonsaving knowledge of God—*it was also bound in idolatry. This view of the problem of knowledge is the single most important contribution of the early Reformed writers to the theological prolegomena of orthodox Protestantism.* Indeed, it is the doctrinal issue

27. *Ibid.*, 310 (emphasis added).

28. For an example of the decline of orthodoxy due to a burgeoning rationalism, see M. I. Klauber and Glenn S. Sunshine, “Jean-Alphonse Turretini on Biblical Accommodation: Calvinist or Socinian?,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 (1990): 7–27.

29. John Warwick Montgomery, e.g., concludes his own assessment of the evidence for the historicity of the resurrection with this: “It should now be very evident to the reader that the possibility of future evidence arising to negate the force of the now existing evidence for Christ’s claims is *almost too small to be entertained*, the evidence for the Resurrection involves only four documents, whose dates of origin have been determined beyond a shadow of a doubt. The only relevant new evidence which would be pertinent to this problem would seem to be a discovery of Christ’s remains . . . , but the possibility of such data ever existing is *virtually nil*” (*The Shape of the Past: An Introduction to Philosophical Historiography* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1968), 237 (emphases added). Do we really propose to defend Christianity by a resurrection that is highly probable? It is all we have available if we propose to deny the *principia*.

that most forcibly presses the Protestant scholastics toward the modification of the medieval models for theological prolegomena.³⁰

In other words, the Reformers recognized the need for a radical reformation of theological prolegomena. They and their progeny recognized that any notion of neutral rationality in natural theological arguments could only conclude for a false god, an idol. For natural theology to take its proper place, it must be organized *within*, not without, the confines of biblical revelation.

This Reformed view of prolegomena, as Muller notes, is the single most important epistemological contribution of orthodox Protestantism. It was the only way to avoid the Romanist assumption of an assumed and publicly common rationality. Arminianism, since its inception, like Romanism, has worked tirelessly to reject Reformed prolegomena in order to incorporate Romanist principles into its foundations. Gauch's proposal continues that work. What is needed is not a "fresh evaluation" of natural theology from the perspective of its ramification. What is needed is a deep understanding and evaluation of Protestant *principia* (and prolegomena), as well as the radical implications of *principia* for theology and apologetics. Nothing less than consistent Christian orthodoxy is at stake in such an evaluation.

30. *Ibid.*, 108 (emphases added).