b. Presuppositions (accompanying misinformation)   Virgil Warren, PhD

Different <u>kinds of presuppositions</u> include (1) <u>preliminary ideas</u> from which further ideas derive. Presuppositions, or pre-understanding, lie ahead of the present matter. They color what we read and hear on <u>this</u> matter. An example of presupposition would be the idea that what works is good (pragmatism).

Presuppositions can be (2) <u>larger constructs</u> that qualify statements about matters within them. **One big issue in contemporary hermeneutics is the question about implicit cultural limitation**. Revelation critiques culture and stands in prophetic relationship to it. Nevertheless, some have entertained the idea that Paul and others sought to show they were not cultural subversives. On the basis of the way they deal with slavery, table fellowship (eating with someone), salutation (speaking to someone), dress code (veil-wearing, hair length), this thinking pattern has been applied to (a) egalitarian *vs.* hierarchical structure of marriage and (b) homosexual behavior between consenting partners. One issue is whether such behaviors mean the same thing in our setting as they did then.

Presuppositions can be (3) <u>predetermined conclusions</u> we put out ahead and work toward.

(4) <u>Our personality bent</u> provides an unconscious impulse toward reading materials in ways compatible with our own nature, our own personality.

Lastly, (5) <u>inadequate concept inventory</u> produces another unconscious presupposition; we process everything through the "grid" that we <u>do</u> have. We "bend" and "fudge" the unknown into the closest thing we know. "Assuming" the completeness of our thinking tools, we may ridicule what we do not understand, *"That does not make any sense."* For a list of basic concepts, see "Concept Inventory." Presuppositions can be conscious or unconscious. In both cases, they are activated by personality tendencies and existential influences.

The <u>destructive results of presupposition</u> include the following:

(a) Reading a statement one way rather than another because the presupposition provides something of a context for it; it provides a principle of selection.

(b) Ignoring the normal rules of <u>language</u> and thought.

(c) Being unwilling to take the <u>time</u> to get the issue framed correctly.

(d) Being <u>selective in data gathering</u> and organization. Selective data gathering comes from personality type, intellectual assumptions, the existential situation, inadequate methods of research. As there is selective sight and hearing, there is also selective data gathering. We can hold our eyes still and move our consciousness around over the picture that our eyes give us. Noises can be going on that people tune out and are not aware of till the noises stop—like the refrigerator going off. Something similar can happen in the thinking-interpreting process.

(e) Being unwilling to listen and understand what someone is saying

(1) Conscious presuppositions

We skew interpretation whenever we put the conclusion out ahead and devise a flow of thought to get there. Each junction point may present more than one direction we could take, but we look ahead to see where to end up and then choose the option here that leads in that direction. Tracing the path from data to conclusion does not prove the conclusion or legitimize the options taken to get there. The format can illustrate <u>consistency</u>, but not accuracy. We are merely organizing <u>confirmatory evidence</u> instead of presenting primary proof. We are showing that our data "fits with" the conclusion, or "supports" it; but we are not showing that the data produces that conclusion. So the question remains as to where the conclusion ever came from. Scholarship in this format simply constructs the most efficient way of getting from starting point to predetermined conclusion. It is dogmatic theology rather than biblical theology.

Sometimes we do know some facts and the conclusion, and we use imagination to get from one to the other. The intervening steps have the pattern objected to before except that the conclusion is known from elsewhere.

(a) Getting the <u>dogmatic question</u> ahead of the exegetical one

[1] happens when people attempt to maintain what they have always believed, especially if they have already publicly committed themselves on it.

[2] happens when people are forming a conclusion on a new topic that they want to fit with what they already believe on other topics.

[3] happens when people want to come out where someone they love or respect has come out.

[4] happens when people want to come out where their religious heritage has come out.

(b) Getting the <u>practical question</u> ahead of the exegetical one happens whenever fear becomes a disrupting element.

[1] *"If I discard this presupposition, what replacement will be <u>better</u> than what I have?"*

[2] *"I do not want friends and relatives to ostracize me."*

[3] *"I may have to change my ideas on other subjects associated with this one, and that is a lot of work. Besides, I have no idea up front how much conceptual chaos will ensue."*

To offset this pragmatic tendency, we must remember that consistency is one problem with pragmatism. Operating by principles and values "overrides" what seems right in a particular situation so there can be a larger good for more people for a longer time.

(c) Allowing the <u>existential circumstance</u> to shape the interpretation (cp. putting a conclusion out ahead and working toward it)

[1] A divorced man's interpretation of the passages about divorce

[2] A homosexual's interpretation of the passages that deal with homosexual behavior

(2) Unconscious presuppositions

Sometimes interpreters do not realize that other possibilities exist besides what they have always assumed. Since they know of no alternative, the one they have they do not regard as a presupposition. In studying under someone or learning within a religious heritage, people can get in the habit of not thinking in a "because-so" fashion. They settle for underlining a viewpoint rather than proving it. They do not distinguish primary proof and confirmatory evidence. The point is not whether an idea fits with a (con)text but whether the context requires it. The question is where concepts come from. They can come from the tacit dimension, so they cannot always explain the source. They develop beliefs from experience more than scripture and move to scripture to confirm experience. They may resort to extremes like allegorizing so scripture will conform to what they need it to say.

People's view on a matter arises simply from consistency with the rest of what they understand. It does not come directly from the biblical materials themselves. Interpreters need to differentiate between consistency and truth.

Augustine's problem with sexual sin provided a framework that led him to epitomize evil in terms of his highlighted problem.

Calvin's training in law provided the base on which he formulated his legal-driven theology. He chided Augustine for not paying enough attention to corrupt attitude, probably because he himself distrusted people—particularly the peasant classes.

Note also the impact of circumstance on interpretation. (a) The secular feminist movement occasioned the rise of evangelical feminist interpretation. (b) A more tolerant treatment of divorce-remarriage took place under the pressure of the Western deterioration of marriage and family. Frankly, sometimes this kind of "loosening" can be good. (c) Premillennialism became increasingly popular in the twentieth century while postmillennialism dominated during the 1800s. The change correlated with a shift in the world's political climate—one that matched the difference between the two millennial schemes. Postmillennialism pictures a world that gets better and better because of the gospel until the millennium comes in on its own; Christ returns after that Golden Age. Premillennialism pictures a world situation that gets worse and worse until Christ has to come and intervene lest his people be wiped out. Postmillennialism fits the era of relative peace and progress that characterized the 1800s; but with the coming of World War I and a series of major international conflicts, premillennialism has come to dominate the eschatological landscape.

Note again the impact of personality on interpretation. One reason for making interpretation a community effort is to moderate viewpoints from extreme personalities. A conventional, rigid, law-and-order personality disproportionately stresses certain elements to the exclusion of interpersonal elements that qualify them. Rigid people tend to be legalistic, literalistic, and concrete in their thinking. They tend to technicalize terminology, to allegorize comparisons, to take generalities as absolutes, to read figurative as literal, to take example as precedent, to confuse language and reality, to hear advice as commandment, and to read statements restrictively. *They forget that things equally true are not equally important,* and *they think that being more exact is being more correct.* There is for them a best way to do everything, and anything less than the best is bad. The perfectionist

reads statements with an absolutist mentality, and does not allow language to have its flexible character. Epistemologically they tend to be foundationalists rather than combinationalists.

On the other hand, loose personalities read scripture with a presupposed looseness. They tend to be combinationalist epistemologically. They are more inclined to take seriously the advice-*vs*.-commandment option in more cases. Hermeneutics calls for personal maturity that can suspend judgment, live with ambiguity, distinguish relative centrality, have a sense of proportion, change viewpoints, see things from another person's point of view, cope with—even appreciate—relativity.

People seek equilibrium, peace, harmony, consistency. When behavior, personality, or circumstances differ from the biblical witness, they adjust one or the other to make peace between personality and environment, on the one hand, and commitment to scripture, on the other. Since they cannot deny scripture while being committed to it, they reinterpret it in a way that makes a consistency between what says and what personality and environment require.

One's personality bent functions as a kind of "presupposition" that becomes a qualifying frame of reference for what they read (note "dispositional properties," as per George Herbert Meade). Personality serves as a filter that catches what "sticks out" when people read scripture; consequently, it causes them to be selective in what they see in the Bible. It causes them to stress certain things over others and influences how they rank the relative importance of things in the faith.

Since rigidness, openness, looseness, and so on, seem natural to people, they also seem true. When they read the Bible, they "eisegete" themselves into the text. They accommodate the text to their own personality and create God in their own image. Personality bents impel them to rationalize their weaknesses hermeneutically. People not only operate culturally according to the "basic values" (Marvin Mayers (*Christianity Confronts Culture*, pp. 149-54); they also operate hermeneutically that way.

What is so insidious about all this is that the people do not realize they are doing it, and it is virtually impossible to convince them that they are doing it. Legalists do not view what they are doing as legalism. They have heard people say that legalism is bad, and they may say so themselves. They do not mean to do the wrong thing, and they do not feel legalistic as they go about their legalism. They feel like they are being precise—like God wants them to be.

(a) Prestige-ascribed *vs*. prestige-achieved personalities tend toward different treatments of passages about church polity, for example. Domineering, overbearing people show their insecurity by reading more extremely the passages about leadership in the church or the home. They read a stronger predominance of <u>authority</u> into passages about leadership because they do not trust other people to follow their <u>influence</u>. Their mind "runs to" interpretations that are authoritarian—that fit with a chain-of-command concept of leadership. A strident "women's libber" makes certain hermeneutical "moves" on biblical texts about deference to leadership. Her aggressive personality inclines her to read in conformity with her bent those texts related to men-women role distinctions. Desiring to have leadership granted to her, any denial of it she assigns to male chauvinism instead of accepting that decision as a comment on an attitude inappropriate for anyone or as a comment on her capabilities in the area involved.

(b) Certain personality types are more likely to become Calvinistic or Pentecostal than others. An affectively oriented person tends to interpret more in the direction of Pentecostal persuasions. Ontological and Pentecostal thinking represent the tendency toward concretization (cp. reification). For Augustinians, having a biological basis for depravity gives a feel of reality to humanity's sinful behavior. For Pentecostals, having demonic forces to explain behavior makes it more tangible. Pentecostalism tends to equate supernatural, transcendent, psychological, and subjective; and in the process changes it from personal into impersonal.

Concrete operational personalities tend to slide <u>influence</u> encounter over into power encounter. It resembles wanting visible, tangible idols to worship. Power encounter conceives of "something" between source and object. It is as if a third person with the right instrumentation (Geiger counter, radio-wave detector) could pick up on what is traveling between them. People may suppose that Western people have lost sensitivity to spiritual warfare whereas third-world people have not. The implication is that occidental cultures should conceive of things differently. The opposite seems more plausible: third-world peoples tend to be more concrete operational, who transform influence into power, living as they do in societies that foster confrontation.

(c) Extrovert personalities tend to create different interpretations of matters that affect church polity and leadership.

(d) A crisis *vs*. non-crisis personality predisposes readers to see perseverance in passages that they do not have to read that way. Such a reading seems more correct because it is more "natural" to their expectations. Crisis personalities organize life in terms of decision points—crisis occasions; once they have dealt with a matter, they pass on to the next one. It is unlikely that they will go back and work through that decision point a second or third time. This replicates the pattern of perseverance *vs*. apostasy.

(e) Another personality variable is the dichotomizing *vs*. holistic one. The binary mind operates as if everything is black-white, either-or, categorical. It does not adequately consider degrees of things. Binary thinkers picture parallel categories rather than overlapping ones and parallel categories rather than continuums or reciprocally related factors. This phenomenon relates to those who may justify not seeking medical attention for their children by saying, *"Should we trust God or man?"*

Binary minds ridicule as vacillating and indecisive any attempt to explain that there are gray areas on some issues. They see such suggestions as capitulations to error and accommodation to heresy. In reality, what often causes seemingly "gray areas" is the interpersonal nature of the Christian faith and the concerns it addresses. Persons-in-relationships is a circumstance too complex to fit a reductionist, binary format, rigid form of thought. People, for example, can have different motives for the same behavior, but admitting such a thing seems too much like waffling.

(f) People with a "penchant for peace" tolerate divergent viewpoints and assign to their own conclusions a tentativeness that facilitates Christian unity.

(g) People highlight in Christianity those aspects that correspond with their strengths. Intellectually brilliant people emphasize informational and conceptual things. Compassionate, sanguine people emphasize personal relationships. Activists stress doing things. People who do not like studying or do not feel capable of doing it well want to downplay the importance of information and to turn people's attention away from thinking deeply about complex matters. It is a kind of "sour grapes" phenomenon.

(3) How presuppositions affect the work of interpretation

(a) Presuppositions cause people intentionally to try to find <u>other than the obvious way</u> to understand a passage so they will not have to change what they have already spent so much time concluding.

(b) Presuppositions cause people <u>not to take enough time</u> to understand what contradicts their presuppositions. Most people find it harder to understand and learn what they do not already believe, because it seems like a waste of time. A "cover-up" expression for this habit is *I just accept this by faith."*

(c) Presuppositions <u>cause people to argue rather than listen</u> to another viewpoint even before they understand it. That is one reason people who do not know as much are easier to convince than people who have already formulated their conclusions.

(d) People tend to <u>close their minds</u> to elements in a viewpoint that challenge their own. They <u>become selective</u> in information gathering. Judicious selection of material can yield unnecessarily convincing conclusions.

(e) Presuppositions <u>color the terms</u> of discussion in ways not meant in an alternative position. It is the "straw man" phenomenon.

(4) Examples of eisegesis (reading an idea into a passage) *vs*. exegesis. Eisegesis happens when a reader inserts into a passage an idea foreign to the context.

**the idea that after the crucifixion Peter went back to his old profession of fishing

**the notion that it took a persecution to make the apostles go out of the immediate Jerusalem-Judaea-Samaria setting

**taking the expression "not discerning the Lord's *body*" to mean the church rather than the body of Jesus represented by the loaf

interpreting the expression "one baptism" in Ephesians **4:5 as a statement against sprinkling and pouring or against trine baptism

**Liberation theologians want to focus on Jesus as a social liberationist; monastics want to focus on him as an ascetic; Jewish Christians want to emphasize his Jewishness; ethnic groups want to picture him with features of their race; mystics have wanted to make a Gnostic out of him.

**the idea that David and Jonathan had a homosexual association

(5) Sources of presuppositions

(a) The existential situation

[1] <u>The surrounding culture</u>. Cultural values are conveyed through mass media, the educational system, branches of the political system.

No one thought of reading Ephesians **5**:21 as "mutual submission" until American culture became engaged in the equal-rights issue between men and women.

[2] Family and church influence

(b) Personality bent