

Van Til: a Reassessment

An Essay

by John M. Frame

I have written a book on Cornelius Van Til, which will be published this year, Lord willing, by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. The book is a sympathetic, critical analysis of Van Til's thought; it tries to determine what in Van Til is of value for apologists today. Bill Edgar of the WTS faculty saw the ms. and suggested that I come to the conference and present to you some of its ideas.

In the final chapter, I summarize the approach to Van Til taken in the book, and I address the question of how we contemporary Christians can best use Van Til's ideas in our witness to the world. What I present here will be essentially that final chapter, with some explanatory additions.

In the book, I try to dispel the impression that Van Til's thought is a "seamless robe," that it must either be accepted or rejected in its entirety. That impression has, of course, been given both by Van Til's friends and his enemies. Thus the literature about Van Til tends to be either uncritical adulation or super-critical debunking. The concept of a book such as mine which seeks to be both sympathetic and critical seems in this environment to be highly anomalous.

Van Til himself tends to give that same impression. He speaks of proving Christian theism "as a unit." In teaching apologetics, both in class and in print, he tended to throw his whole system at the reader all at once, so to speak, rather than bit by bit. And if the student or reader doesn't grasp it all, well, Van Til throws it all at him a second time. Thus the reader gets the impression that he cannot pick and choose; it is either all or nothing; Van Til must be thoroughly embraced or totally opposed. All of that is in keeping, of course, with Van Til's background in philosophical idealism, and, on the other hand, with his Kuyperian-Machenite "antithetical" mode of thought.

Yet I have dared to differ with this approach. I have tried to break down Van Til's system into its basic elements, so as to analyze and evaluate each one at a time. I do not deny that Van Til's thought is highly interrelated and systematic; I have tried to bring out those systematic interrelations as best I can. But it seems to me to make more pedagogical sense to move from the simple to the complex, from the known to the unknown.

In this process I have concluded that Van Til's thought is not, after all, a "seamless robe." There are some elements of it which are unquestionably

biblical and fundamental to Christian thought and life. These constitute an indispensable basis for any future apologetic. Other aspects of Van Til's system, however, are not well-grounded scripturally and can be forgotten without loss.

To show this, let me give you my outline of Van Til's system:

- I. The Metaphysics of Knowledge
 - A. The Self-Contained God
 - B. The Trinitarian One-and-Many
 - C. Divine Sovereignty
 - D. Analogical Knowledge
 - E. Revelation
 - F. Presuppositions
 - G. Reason, Logic, Evidence

- II. The Ethics of Knowledge
 - A. Antithesis
 - B. Common Grace
 - C. Unbelieving Thought: Rationalism and Irrationalism

- III. Apologetic Method
 - A. The Traditional Method
 - B. Spiral or Circular Argument
 - C. Reasoning by Presupposition
 - D. Models

- IV. Criticism of Other Thinkers
 - A. Greek Philosophy and Scholasticism
 - B. Immanuel Kant and Karl Barth
 - C. Herman Dooyeweerd

The strongest part of Van Til's system is what I have called "the metaphysics of knowledge." In these areas I have very little criticism. It seems to me that in these areas, Van Til is simply reproducing the teaching of scripture and showing its applications to human thought and life. His view of the creator-creature distinction is nothing more or less than generic Calvinism. Analogical knowledge simply means that the goal of knowledge is an understanding of reality which images as faithfully as possible on the created level God's own understanding. One who thinks analogously seeks to think in a way that is obedient to God's norms for thought. That means, of course, that all human thought is bound by divine revelation. And, in turn, that implies that the truth of divine revelation must be the most fundamental presupposition of human thought.

Van Til does not disparage the use of reason, logic and evidence, as many critics suppose, though there are some statements in his writings that are a bit confusing in this respect. He merely insists that these be subordinate to God's word, a limitation to which no Christian should object.

I do take issue with his illegitimate *application* of these principles in the Clark controversy. In that controversy, Van Til insisted that there is "not one point of identity" between God's mind and man's. Clark believed this view had skeptical implications. He insisted that God and man are capable of entertaining and believing the same propositions. Beyond this, the debate went through many complicated twists and turns. However, Clark never denied, in my view, the point that God's mind and man's were different in their metaphysical nature. Nor did Van Til deny that God and man could believe the same proposition. Therefore, in my view, the controversy was really unnecessary and largely based on misunderstanding. Van Til in my view was at his worst when he was debating with other Christian apologists.

Van Til's view of the "ethics of knowledge" is an area of both strength and weakness. Certainly he is right to insist that non-Christians know, but suppress, the truth of God's revelation. In Romans 1, scripture makes that assertion quite explicitly. But Van Til seems to search for words in order to express how the unbeliever can in one sense know, and in another sense be ignorant of, the truth of God. In certain moods, he uses the language of "extreme antithesis," suggesting that the unbeliever has no knowledge at all, that he "knows nothing truly," and therefore no area of agreement with the believer. Other times, however, Van Til describes various senses in which the unbeliever can and does have genuine knowledge. He says, for example, that although the unbeliever seeks to think according to atheistic principles, he is not always successful in thinking according to those principles. At times, "in spite of himself," or by "borrowed capital," he finds himself thinking in terms of Christian principles instead of non-Christian ones. This and other formulations produce a deep tension in Van Til's thought. Uncharacteristically, he did admit that this was a problem in his system, one for which he did not have an adequate answer.

While it is true that all the unbeliever's actions and thoughts are in service of his would-be autonomy, the language of extreme antithesis is highly misleading and confusing to the practical work of apologetics. It is better to say that the unbeliever's depravity manifests itself in many varied forms, and that the non-Christian can and does utter either truth or falsehood for his purposes.

The doctrine of common grace deals with the question of how God can give good gifts to the non-elect, to the reprobate. More specifically, the question arises of how God can present the promises of the gospel to the reprobate, to those whom he has foreordained not to benefit from those promises. Van Til's doctrine of common grace gets off to a good start, insisting on the

importance of historical process. God gives blessings to the reprobate because the final judgment has not arrived. After human beings are assigned to their final destinies, there will be no more common grace. The elect will be blessed; the non-elect will be punished; and there will therefore be no blessings in common between them.

However, Van Til adds to this account the unhistorical and unbiblical notion that the free offer of the gospel is directed toward a "generality" of people, rather than actual persons. Then Van Til compounds the confusion by postulating, without biblical warrant, a continuous process in which unbelief becomes worse and worse over time.

On the other hand, he introduces a very helpful apologetic tool in showing that unbelief is inseparably linked to the dialectic of rationalism and irrationalism, which destroys all basis for intelligible predication. Unbelief is rationalistic, because it insists on the autonomy of human thought, and therefore insists that human thought is the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, of right and wrong. On the other hand, unbelief is also irrationalistic, because it believes that the apparent order in the universe is ultimately based on disorder, upon chance.

Van Til points out how unbelieving thought bounces back and forth, inconsistently, between rationalism and irrationalism. In Parmenides, rationalism generates a doctrine of static "being," while irrationalism generates a mythological explanation of how the illusion of movement can exist. Plato's forms represent his rationalism; his irrationalism is seen in his view of the empirical world, the world of mere opinion. The enduring problem of Plato's philosophy is the difficulty of achieving any intelligible relationship between the two worlds. In Kant, the same problem recurs in the relation between the irrational noumenal world and the rationalistically conceived phenomenal.

Now let us look at Van Til's view of apologetic method. He suggests what he calls a "transcendental" method or "reasoning by presupposition." Here he emphasizes that we should seek to show that no meaning, intelligibility, or predication, is possible apart from the God of scripture. He also insists that this argument must be "circular" or "spiral," always resting on the presupposition of God's truth.

I agree that apologetic argument must be circular in one sense, in the sense that a Christian apologist must never abandon his Christian presuppositions when he argues with a non-Christian. We cannot abandon those presuppositions, for we believe that those presuppositions define the proper way to reason. Therefore, when we seek to prove those presuppositions, we must presuppose them, and that is a *kind* of circularity. Of course, that is the kind of circularity that always exists when people try to prove the truth of an ultimate standard of rationality. To prove that human reason is

ultimate, one must presuppose human reason, etc. This does not imply that apologetic argument needs to use viciously circular arguments, such as "the Bible is the word of God because it is the word of God."

I also agree with the transcendental character of Van Til's apologetic. We should seek to establish that the biblical God is the source of all meaning and intelligibility in the world, for indeed he is the source of all meaning and intelligibility in the world. However, Van Til tries to derive from the nature of transcendental argument some additional restrictions on the apologist, restrictions which I consider unnecessary. (1) He insists that arguments for Christianity should be indirect rather than direct. Instead of proving the existence of God directly, Van Til insists that we prove it indirectly, by showing the "impossibility of the contrary." He urges us to adopt the unbeliever's presupposition "for the sake of argument" and show that that presupposition leads to incoherence and meaninglessness. (2) He demands that we always claim absolute certainty rather than probability. (3) He occasionally requires that we announce our entire theology "at the outset" of every apologetic encounter. (4) He occasionally requires that the argument conclude by proving the @UN(whole) of Christian theism, rather than merely proving individual doctrines. (5) He insists that we may never present Christian truth as a "supplement" to the unbeliever's knowledge.

In my view, Van Til's own arguments do not always observe these principles, and in any case I believe that he has failed to make an adequate case for them. I cannot see that any of these five rules can be established from scripture or as a consequence of the transcendental nature of apologetics. It seems to me (1) that an indirect argument is not necessarily the only kind of argument that can establish the transcendental conclusion, (2) that although the evidence for God's reality is certain, our verbal formulations of that evidence may be merely probable, etc.

Van Til is at his worst in his critiques of other thinkers, but even there he provides valuable insight. His critique of the "traditional apologetic method" seems to me often to make unreasonable demands upon past thinkers (such as the illegitimate rules mentioned in the above paragraph). His criticisms are valuable, however, as advice on strategy and clear communication. Certainly, the apologetic tradition has obscured the gospel by failing to make clear (to unbelievers and believers alike) the radical antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought. It has even used formulae (e.g., "bring on your revelations! let them make peace with the law of contradiction and the facts of experience, and they will deserve a rational man's assent") which, while true in themselves, taken in context encourage unbelievers to continue thinking autonomously. Unfortunately, Van Til sometimes fails to distinguish adequately between (1) issues of communication and strategy, and (2) issues of biblical orthodoxy. He also

fails to distinguish adequately between spiritual and procedural issues. For example, he suggests that "direct" arguments, as opposed to "indirect," are unambiguous expressions of an ungodly neutralism.

There are similar problems in Van Til's critiques of scholasticism and of the Amsterdam philosophy; but he does hit upon some genuine and serious errors and confusions in those systems, and even more in the system of Karl Barth. For giving the church such clear warning about these errors, he deserves the commendation of all Christians.

I believe, therefore, that we can learn much that is good and valuable from Van Til, without being slavish devotees. It is not necessary for the Van Tillian movement to maintain a "movement mentality." Nor is it necessary to stand in "antithesis" against all our fellow Christians who have thus far not joined that movement.

A Van Tillian apologetic for the next century should free itself from those Van Tillian restrictions which are illegitimate and then enrich itself by developing a great variety of arguments contextualized for many different sorts of apologetic encounter. Van Til has taught us that every fact of history testifies to the reality of the biblical God. He has only begun to show us how this takes place. It is for us further to implement this vision, by showing how the presuppositions of scripture reveal everything for what it truly is in relation to God. That is an exciting task indeed.

It is also important for us to move beyond the traditional Van Tillian preoccupation with methodology.¹ Van Tillian courses in apologetics, including mine, have focused far too much on methods, especially upon distinguishing our methods from those of other schools of thought. More time should be spent on developing actual arguments. We need to spend more time addressing unbelievers, less time arguing with one another over methods. Students of Van Tillian apologetics need to be far better informed about Christian evidences and about the current situations which the apologist must address.

My critical account of Van Til allows us to take a somewhat less apocalyptic view of methodological differences among apologists, so that we can indeed concentrate on fulfilling the Great Commission. If this book can encourage believers in that work, it will have accomplished its purpose. _

¹ Thanks to Greg Bahnsen who impressed this truth upon me in recent remarks.