

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Christian Perspective on John Frame

John W. Robbins

Perspectives on the Word of God, An Introduction to Christian Ethics, John M. Frame. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1990, indexes, 66 pages, \$5.95.

It is always instructive to read books written by seminary professors, for from these books Christian laymen can find out what is being taught in the seminary classes. From these books we learn what the future teachers of the church have already learned, and that, in some cases, is not only instructive, but positively alarming.

John M. Frame is Associate Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at Westminster Seminary in California. This book comprises three lectures, the Kenneth Kantzer lectures, that he delivered at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois in November 1988. The lectures are entitled: "The Nature of the Word of God," "The Media of the Word of God," and "The Word of God and Christian Ethics." He reports that this little book "presents in brief some of the main theses from two of the forthcoming volumes [of his theology trilogy], *The Doctrine of the Word of God* and *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*." Frame has already published *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, which we hope to review in a future *Trinity Review*.

The Orthodox Pharisees

Frame wastes no time making startling statements. In a footnote on page 5 he writes: "The Pharisees were very orthodox in their beliefs but, Jesus teaches us, devoid of true faith."

Now Jesus does teach us that the Pharisees generally were "devoid of true faith," but he teaches us that by denying that the Pharisees were orthodox in their beliefs: "You hypocrites! Blind Guides! Lovers of Money! If you believed Moses you would believe me; for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" Christ explicitly denies that the Pharisees held orthodox beliefs. Christ disagrees with Professor Frame.

Frame offers us a paradox – as his school of theology is so fond of doing – the paradox of an orthodox believer who does not believe orthodoxy. He confuses himself and his readers by using two words: faith and belief, as though they were different things. Jesus is not so confused, nor is the rest of the Bible: Faith and belief are the same, a true believer is one who believes the truth, and true faith is faith in the truth. As Jesus said, the Pharisees were devoid of true faith because they did not believe Moses, that is, they did not believe Moses' writings. (Notice that "believing Moses" is "believing Moses' writings" and "believing me

[Jesus]" is "believing my [Jesus'] words." Trusting a person and believing his words are the same thing.)

Frame's elementary confusion about faith, which vitiates the rest of what he has to say about faith and psychology, could easily have been avoided had Frame believed what the Bible has to say about the mind and faith. But the school of theology to which Frame belongs has been struggling against the intellect for fifty years.

No Revelation

On the following page, Frame indicates that he prefers the word "word" to the word "revelation": "There is a sense in which we do not have 'revelation' (cf. F. Gerald Downing, *Has Christianity a Revelation?* [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964]), but we do have the word." Nevertheless, he continues, "we *apprehend* God's revelation by means of human reason, human sense experience, and the whole range of hard to define intuitions, feelings, and consciousness we call 'subjectivity.' None of these, in itself, gives absolute knowledge. If it did, we would not need God's word. But these human faculties work together, in mutual dependence, to lead us toward that truth, which is absolute and final, God's word to us."

This paragraph raises a number of questions: If sense experience, reason, intuitions, and feelings work together "to lead us toward that truth," do we ever get there? Do we ever have truth? Or are we left with what Frame calls "human knowledge," as opposed to "absolute knowledge"? Worse, if anything could be worse, is Frame suggesting that feelings, reason, and sense experience, as distinct from revelation, are the only sources of truth? As we shall see, that seems to be exactly what he is saying. He seems to have abandoned every conception of an epistemology that does not rely on feelings, sense experience, and what he calls reason. Frame seems to have discarded revelation as an independent source of truth. He writes of human faculties leading us toward the truth; the Christian idea is that truth comes from God to man. Frame has the epistemological situation upside down.

A Humanistic Framework

Frame's entire scheme ignores the insuperable problems of empiricism, rationalism, and irrationalism outlined by Gordon Clark in his *Three Types of Religious Philosophy*. Clark demonstrates that man cannot discover truth using his own faculties; that man is totally dependent upon God and revelation for truth; and that God reveals truth, man does not discover it. Frame seems to be of the opinion that if we combine the results of these three human faculties – reason, sensation, and feelings – so flimsy in themselves, we can arrive at knowledge. To borrow a phrase, this might be called the three leaky buckets theory of knowledge: Each bucket leaks like a sieve, but taken together, they hold water. It doesn't work with water, and it doesn't work with theology either.

Frame thinks that the "evidentialist" (the empiricist) "has a point to make also, from the situational perspective. He says that we must offer evidence; we must be willing and able to show a correspondence between our theology and the real world. I gladly acknowledge that point, so you can call me an evidentialist as well as a presuppositionalist!" (7-8).

This statement ignores the insuperable problems with a correspondence theory of truth. It wrongly assumes that the evidentialist, through sensation, knows the "real world." It wrongly assumes that the empiricist knows what evidence is. More importantly, it implies that Christian theology is not real, for it is not part of the "real world," but merely something that "corresponds" to the "real world." Frame's humanistic epistemology authorizes sense man to judge revelation according to his sensations.

Subjectivism

Frame's confusion gets worse. Not only are evidentialism and presuppositionalism both valuable, he says, so is subjectivism: "I can also find some value in the 'subjectivist' apologetics found in Pascal, Kierkegaard, and others...." Which others? one must ask. Perhaps he will tell us in his forthcoming books.

Does Frame endorse Pascal's Wager as an apologetic device? Because the Wager is "subjective," it works as well for Muslims as it does for Christians. Does Frame join Kierkegaard's battle against the intellect? I fear that he does, for Frame's apologetics is a tissue of fallacies from beginning to end. In my classes on apologetics I quote Kierkegaard in order to refute him, not praise him: "It was intelligence and nothing else that had to be opposed. Presumably that is why I, who had the job, was armed with an immense intelligence."

On page 10 Frame opines that the phrase "word of God" is "in some mysterious way...a name of God's eternal Son." Had he read Gordon Clark's book, *The Johannine Logos*, the mystery would have been cleared up. Trouble is, I think Frame has indeed read Clark's book, but he prefers to conduct his discussion as if it and Clark had never existed. In this Frame is not alone. Most of the writing produced by seminary teachers today is based on a sort of an anti-Voltairean principle: Since Gordon Clark does exist, we shall have to ignore him. The reason is simple: Clark's books are both irrefragable and directly contrary to the empiricism and irrationalism prevalent among contemporary theologians.

Revelation Denied

In his second lecture Frame tells us that "All of God's word to us is mediated, in the sense that it always reaches us through some creaturely means" (19). Notice the "all" and the "always."

He gives this example: "This is true even when revelation seems most 'direct.' For example, when God spoke to the people of Israel gathered around Mt. Sinai, and they heard the divine voice from Heaven, even then God's word reached the people through creaturely media. For one thing, God spoke human language. For another, he used the normal earthly atmosphere to transmit the sounds to the eardrums of the people. Further, it was the people's brain cells that interpreted the sounds as words and interpreted the words as God's message. God's word never lacks media when it is spoken to human beings" (19-20). Notice the "never." Frame means

to deny that God's revelation is ever direct or immediate.

This paragraph reveals how much an empiricist, even a behaviorist, John Frame is. Let us address his assertions in the order in which he makes them.

First, Frame assumes that language is human and therefore "creaturely." Apparently he has forgotten *Genesis*, where God speaks first in erecting the world, and then speaks to Adam in a language that God gave to Adam. Language originated with God, not man. The language Adam spoke originated with God, not Adam. Language is part of God's nature, and it is part of the image of God, man's rationality. Frame's theory of language, to the extent that he can be said to have a theory, is not supported by Scripture.

Second, Frame unreflectingly adopts the current opinions of scientists and asserts that sounds are transmitted by vibrations in the atmosphere, which bang on the eardrums, which rattle the brain. He cites no Scripture supporting this view. The Bible tells us that God hears our prayers. Does this mean that God lives in an atmosphere and has eardrums and brain cells as well? When Christ carried on a conversation with Moses and Elijah, did they have brain cells and eardrums? When God speaks, do his vocal cords set the air to vibrating? Do Christ and the saints in Heaven use molecular vibrations to rattle each other's brains? Frame's theory of the transmission of revelation is not supported by Scripture. Perhaps he derived it from his feelings.

Third, Frame thinks that brain cells "interpret" vibrations in the air as words and words as God's message. Brain cells can do none of these things. Brain cells are complex organic chemicals; they do not, they cannot, interpret anything. Frame's views are behaviorism, straight out of the books of J. B. Watson and B. F. Skinner. Only minds, not cells, hear, understand, and interpret.

John, in the first chapter of his *Gospel*, tells us that Christ lights the mind of every man. Directly. Jesus tells Peter, and us, that God the Father revealed his truth directly without the mediation of flesh and blood. Frame's empirical and behaviorist theory of knowledge is not supported by Scripture. There is

no verse in the Bible – none – that supports the idea that brain cells interpret and understand. There is no verse that says that revelation depends upon vibrations in the air. There is none that says language is of human origin. The Bible denies empiricism and behaviorism. There is a world of difference between John Frame's little book and another little book written 1,500 years ago, Augustine's *De Magistro*. One reflects Scripture; the other reflects the confusion of the twentieth century.

Biblicism

Frame belabors his opinion that God's revelation is always "mediated" through "creaturely" means. Let us grant his opinion merely for the sake of argument. What follows? That we do not have the absolute truth? Consider this: The Bible was, in fact, written by men – worse, by sinful men. Is it therefore less than wholly true? Is it less than God intended it to be? Is not God omnipotent, and if he decides to reveal truth to man can he not do so? Frame seems to be implying that all "creaturely" mediation implies degradation. Undoubtedly some forms of mediation do. Ironically, it is those forms of mediation that Frame endorses that would, at best, distort revelation.

But Frame's confusion gets worse.

Frame asserts that "God reveals through events, words, and people" (20). "The right use of each form of revelation requires [note well] the use of the others...., Our understanding grows not by looking at the forms of revelation [such as the Bible] in isolation from one another, but by constantly correlating them, comparing them, and viewing them together" (33). Frame goes on to warn us against "biblicism."

The question that must be asked at this point is this: What has happened to *sola Scriptura*? What has happened to the Reformation principle: the Bible alone? What has happened to the sufficiency of Scripture? Frame admits that "the Holy Scriptures play an absolutely crucial role in the overall organism of revelation," but that role, he says, is "the covenant constitution of the people of God."

The absolutely crucial question for Frame is this: What role do the Scriptures play in providing men with truth? His answer is that Scripture is but one of at least three sources of truth. "Biblicism," taking the Bible as the source of truth in isolation from either sense experience or feelings, Frame says, is not "Biblically defensible,"

According to Frame, God's word is available from three sources: the Bible, the world, and the self (52). (Oddly, he cites Scripture for this bizarre statement.) "A Christian will study these three realms presupposing their coherence and therefore seeking at each point to integrate each source of knowledge with the other two" (52). In fact, Frame asserts, "we cannot know what Scripture says without knowing at the same time something of God's revelation outside of Scripture" (53). The Bible does not seem to be Frame's only source of truth, let alone his axiom or presupposition.

Frame concludes his lectures by saying that "The view I am presenting...has ecumenical implications." "None of these perspectives [Scripture, situation, subjectivity] rightly understood, takes precedence over the other two, because each includes the other two" (56).

Conclusion

We, too, ought to draw some conclusions from these statements and Frame's book.

First, Frame simply has not done his homework. Until he answers the arguments against the non-Christian epistemologies of empiricism, rationalism, and subjectivism in detail, his entire theological enterprise is, to be as charitable as possible, a complete waste of time, energy, and money.

Second, Frame's eclectic epistemology is fatal to Christian thought. Frame repeatedly speaks favorably of theological liberals. *Sola Scriptura* disappears. God's revelation gets lost in a melange of feelings, intuitions, and sensations. Frame seems not to have grasped any of the philosophical implications of the phrase, "in him we live and move and have our being." Or of the first chapter of *John*. Or of *Romans*¹ Tion Tw cof Romansly hChrin

knowledge at all, for it is always "mediated" by "sense," by "feelings," or by "reason." In John Frame's world, we are imprisoned in a creaturely box that prevents us from knowing absolute truth and prevents God from revealing his truth to us directly. It is a crime that this sort of confusion is being taught in seminary, especially in a seminary that is reputed to be conservative and orthodox.

Thank you for the books you have sent us for review. We appreciated receiving them. At this time, we do not wish to continue receiving review copies. You may take us off your mailing list. I am retiring as book review editor. If you have any questions, please direct them to Lin Williams who is taking over as the new book review editor.

Sincerely,

Marvin T. Hunn,

Bibliotheca Sacra (Dallas Theological Seminary)

Correspondence

Recently we asked periodicals to which we had been sending review copies of our books if they wished to continue to receive them. Here are some of the more interesting responses:

Dear Mr. Robbins

Thank you for your letter of October 26, 1991. Since it is unlikely that we will be publishing reviews or notices of Gordon Clark's writings in the future it is not necessary to send us your review copies.

Sincerely,

John Bolt, Editor,

Calvin Theological Journal (Calvin Seminary)

Dear Sir:

We have received several of your books for review over the past 4 years and have reviewed a couple of them in a publication we published for about two years, *Pilgrim Examiner*. Recently we received a letter asking if we wish to continue receiving review copies. We really find no time or benefit reviewing this type of book, so we ask you to stop sending review books. We are returning a few of the books you sent.

Sincerely,

Charles H. Shofstahl,

Pilgrim Brethren Press

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Cornelius Van Til

John W. Robbins

Over the past forty-five years a myth has evolved about a theologian in Philadelphia who has single handedly defeated the forces of intellectual darkness, a thinker so profound and so orthodox that he is nothing less than a new Copernicus. In this essay I intend to examine this myth and the man behind it, Professor Cornelius Van Til of Westminster Theological Seminary.

Professor Van Til is the object of fierce loyalty and reverence by many of his students. This attitude has both causes and consequences. One of its consequences is an almost total lack of critical discussion of Van Til's distinctive ideas. Some of Van Til's followers do not even seem to understand his ideas. They have been enthralled by the myth that surrounds the tall and handsome professor of theology. One of Professor Van Til's biographers is so misled by the myth that he falsifies a bit of history concerning Van Til. Hero worship is a prominent characteristic of many of Van Til's followers, and the ordinary Christian is both baffled and embarrassed by the sounds and the spectacle of bowing and scraping that occur in certain circles. We cannot, and do not, blame Dr. Van Til for the behavior of his followers. He is undoubtedly more intelligent than most, if not all, of them.

If Professor Van Til were all his disciples believe him to be, there would be good reason for the reverence, awe, loyalty, and devotion. If Van Til had done all the things he is reputed to have done, to be all the things he is reputed to be, this writer

would be among the first to join his entourage of admirers. But there is a discontinuity (to use one of Van Til's favorite words) between the man and the myth. Such a gulf between the man and the legendary theologian makes all that loyalty and admiration misplaced. After one has penetrated the myth, and that can be done only by reading Van Til's own words—a task which few people seem to have done or care to do—the contrast between the man and the myth is startling. The theologian of mythic proportions bears little resemblance to Professor Van Til, who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary for forty-five years. In the next few pages I shall examine and explain several aspects of his work, ranging from the style of his writing to his doctrines of God and the Bible. In all these areas, it will be seen that he fails to meet scriptural standards for Christian teachers, and in at least two cases, he makes such serious errors that heresy is the only appropriate word to describe his lifelong teaching about God and the Bible.

The Mythological Van Til

"Van Til's insights," writes John Frame of Westminster Theological Seminary, "are life-transforming and world-transforming" (Richard Pratt, *Every Thought Captive*, [Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979], viii). "Dr. Van Til," says Richard C. Pratt, Jr., is "undoubtedly the greatest defender of the Christian faith in our century" (*ibid.*, xi). The prolific author, Rousas Rushdoony, believes that "in every area of thought,

the philosophy of Cornelius Van Til is of critical and central importance" (E. R. Geehan, ed. *Jerusalem and Athens*, [Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971], 348). Frame believes that Van Til's "contribution to theology is of virtually Copernican dimensions...when one considers the uniqueness of his apologetic position and then further considers the implications of that apologetic for theology, one searches for superlatives to describe the significance of Van Til's overall approach"(Gary North, ed. *Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, [Ross House Books, 1976], 295). In another article, Frame describes Van Til as "a thinker of enormous power, combining unquestioned orthodoxy with dazzling originality.... Van Til...is perhaps the most important Christian thinker of the twentieth century" (*New Horizons*, [Magazine of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church], October 1985, 1).

Perhaps sensing that he is dangerously close to going off the deep end, Frame concedes that "Van Til is not perfect or infallible" (4). And Frame adds "another important admission of Van Til": "He [Van Til] told me that he does not believe his distinctive views should be made a test of orthodoxy in the church. He does not consider them to have that sort of final, definitive character" (*ibid.*). The historian C. Gregg Singer believes, that "Cornelius Van Til has given to the church a truly monumental apologetics" (*Jerusalem and Athens*, 328). Forty years ago, Van Til had already been described as a "theological giant" by one of his admirers. This is the legendary Van Til, the theologian about whom it is necessary to say, lest the reader get the wrong impression, that he is neither perfect nor infallible. How does this legendary character square with the actual theologian? Let us examine his writings and see.

Van Til the Communicator

God is concerned with the clarity of his revelation and demands that Christian teachers be clear in their thinking and teaching. For example, in *Deuteronomy 27:2-8* Moses and the elders gave a command to the people: "When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with

plaster ... and you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up." The Lord commanded Habakkuk (2:2): "Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it." Luke wrote his gospel because "it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you ... so that you may know...."

Christ spoke to the people in parables because he wished to confuse them, but to his disciples he spoke plainly. "The disciples came to him and asked, 'Why do you speak to the people in parables?' He replied, 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.... This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand." In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding...." ' " (*Matthew 13:10-14*; see also *Mark 4*). Paul preached the Gospel clearly, and he urged that it be taught clearly in the churches: "Now, brothers, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the flute or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? ... If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and he is a foreigner to me" (*1 Corinthians 14:6-11*).

The Cult of Unintelligibility

In contrast to this Biblical ideal of clarity, which was also Calvin's ideal and even a twentieth-century Hegelian philosopher's ideal, Van Til's prose is frequently unintelligible. This very unintelligibility is transformed by Van Til's perfervid disciples into a sign of great intelligence and profundity. Thus one of Van Til's biographers, William White, Jr., recounts the proceedings of a banquet at Westminster Seminary: "...the master of

ceremonies was presenting the good-natured Dutchman. 'There is a controversy today as to who is the greatest intellect of this segment of the twentieth century,' the m. c. said. 'Probably most thinking people would vote for the learned Dr. Einstein. Not me. I wish to put forth as my candidate for the honor, Dr. Cornelius Van Til.' (Loud applause.) 'My reason for doing so is this: Only eleven people in the world understand Albert Einstein ...Nobody—but nobody in the world—understands Cornelius Van Til' " (*Van Til-Defender of the Faith*, [Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1979], 181-182). Of course, the emcee was being humorous, but it was humor with a point. Had Van Til not been unintelligible, there could have been no such joke.

This tendency to assume that unintelligibility implies superior intelligence, learning, or profundity may explain Van Til's popularity to a great extent. It may also explain why he is so often quoted and misquoted and his name so frequently invoked by people who do not understand what he has written. John Frame, Van Til's heir apparent at Westminster Seminary, wishes he "had a nickel for every speech I've heard in presbytery or elsewhere, when someone thought he was expounding Van Til and was actually dead wrong" (*New Horizons*, 1-2).

The Practice of Unintelligibility

Now, of course, Van Til cannot be held responsible for either the impetuosity or the ignorance of some of his disciples. But he can be and ought to be faulted for a writing style that lends itself so easily to misunderstanding. In his little pamphlet, *Toward A Reformed Apologetics*, Van Til confesses, under the heading "Retractions and Clarifications": "I have not always made perfectly clear that in presenting Christ to lost men, we must present Him for what He is. He has told us what He is in the Scriptures. Apparently, I have given occasion for people to think that I am speculative or *philosophical* first and *biblical* afterwards"(no publisher, no date, page 24, emphasis is Van Til's).

In an interview in *Christianity Today* in 1977, Van Til made the following statements, all in the same paragraph. Compare his third sentence with his

sixth, and you will get some idea why understanding him is very difficult: "My concern is that the demand for non-contradiction when carried to its logical conclusion reduces God's truth to man's truth. It is unscriptural to think of man as autonomous. The common ground we have with the unbeliever is our knowledge of God, and I refer repeatedly to *Romans* 1:19. All people unavoidably know God by hating God. After that they need to have true knowledge restored to them in the second Adam. I deny common ground with the natural man, dead in trespasses and sins, who follows the god of this world"(*Christianity Today*, December 30, 1977, 22). In the third sentence he says, "The common ground we have with the unbeliever is our knowledge of God...." In the sixth sentence he says, "I deny common ground with the natural man...." Which is it? Or is the unbeliever not a natural man, and the natural man not an unbeliever? Do we have common ground with the natural man, the unbeliever, or don't we? Or am I asking a foolish question based on mere human logic?

This contradiction is glaring, yet one finds similar contradictions throughout Van Til's works. What is equally confusing, however, is his use of meaningless phrases. In the first sentence, what does "reduces God's truth to man's truth" mean? It certainly sounds bad, but does it mean anything? Is Van Til advocating a theory of two kinds of truth? Further, how does insisting that statements be non-contradictory "reduce God's truth to man's truth"? Is man the inventor of logical consistency, or does God claim to be? Is there any shadow of turning with God? Is he not the same yesterday, today, and forever? Can the Scriptures be broken? Is God the author of confusion?

Equally important, what connections, if any, are there between the first three sentences of this paragraph I have quoted? It is these sorts of problems—the emphatic assertion of contradictions, the use of meaningless phrases, and the disjointedness of his sentences—that make Van Til the communicator fall far short of the Biblical ideal of clarity. As we shall see in a few moments, Van Til dogmatically defends this confusion as a sign of piety and condemns plain speaking as impious.

Van Til the Presuppositionalist

On the subject of how Christianity should be defended—the subject called apologetics—there are basically only two schools in this century, the evidentialist and the presuppositionalist. Men like Thomas Aquinas, Charles Hodge, William Paley, and in this century John Warwick Montgomery, Norman Geisler, and John Gerstner are usually considered evidentialists. Others, like Cornelius Van Til and Gordon H. Clark, are considered presuppositionalists. The basic difference between the two schools, and the explanation for their names, is that the evidentialists affirm the validity of the arguments for the existence of God and the truth of the Bible, and the presuppositionalists deny the arguments' validity. The presuppositionalists argue that God's existence and the truth of the Bible must be assumed or presupposed.

Professor Van Til is regarded by admirers and critics alike as Mr. Presuppositionalist himself. A recent book by three evidentialists (John Gerstner, R. C. Sproul, and Arthur Lindsley), *Classical Apologetics*, calls Van Til "without doubt, the leading exponent of presuppositionalism." "Van Tillianism is almost a synonym for presuppositionalism..."(183).

Endorsing the Proofs for God's Existence

Surprising as it may be to these critics and to some admirers of Van Til, Van Til does not reject the proofs for the existence of God, and he says so repeatedly in his books. This fact removes him from the presuppositionalist camp. Van Til writes: "Men ought to reason analogically from nature to nature's God. Men ought, therefore, to use the cosmological argument analogically in order thus to conclude that God is the creator of this universe.... Men ought also to use the ontological argument analogically" (*An Introduction to Systematic Theology* [1971], 102).

He goes on, quoting himself: "The argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity is objectively valid. We should not tone down the

validity of this argument to the probability level. The argument may be poorly stated, and may never be adequately stated. But in itself the argument is absolutely sound" (*The Defense of the Faith*, [Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967, third edition], 197).

On the same page Van Til writes: "Accordingly I do not reject 'the theistic proofs' but merely insist on formulating them in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of Scripture. That is to say, if the theistic proof is constructed as it ought to be constructed, it is objectively valid, whatever the attitude of those to whom it comes may be." Van Til makes the same point in another of his syllabi, *Apologetics* [1971], (64): "Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism." And on page 65, "the Reformed apologist maintains that there is an absolutely valid argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christian theism."

One of Van Til's students and now professor of apologetics and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, John Frame, has made the same point: "Van Til is not simply opposed to the theistic proofs as students often imagine. On the contrary, he gives them strong endorsement. But he insists that they be formulated in a distinctively Christian way, rejecting any 'proof' based on a non-Christian epistemology" (*Foundations of Christian Scholarship*, 301n.). Thom Notaro in his book, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence*, (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980), makes the same point, even finding that "the frequency with which Van Til defends the notion of proof is alarming..." (65). I have cited perhaps only a third of Van Til's endorsements of the theistic proofs that have appeared in his published writings.

Rejecting the Proofs of God's Existence

On the other hand, Van Til also makes statements such as this: "Of course Reformed believers do not seek to prove the existence of their God. To seek to prove or to disprove the existence of this God would be to seek to deny him. To seek to prove or

disprove this God presupposes that man can identify himself and discover facts in relation to laws in the universe without reference to God. A God whose existence is 'proved' is not the God of Scripture." He simultaneously maintains that "Reformed believers do not seek to prove the existence of their God" and that "the Reformed apologist maintains that there is an absolutely valid argument for the existence of God."

There are three things that must be said at this point: First, Van Til never formulated the theistic proofs "in a distinctively Christian way," despite his "insistence" that this be done and Dr. Gordon Clark's repeated requests to see Dr. Van Til's new version of the theistic proofs. Therefore, Professor Van Til believes in the validity of a proof he never wrote out.

Second, these views remove Van Til from the camp of the presuppositionalists. Professor John Frame, for example, believes that "Cornelius Van Til, in my view, should not be grouped with Gordon Clark as a 'presuppositionalist' as is often done. Van Til, rather, presents us with a complete epistemology involving motifs from all three tendencies [rationalism, empiricism, and subjectivism] and more" ("Epistemological Perspectives and Evangelical Apologetics," in the *Bulletin of the Evangelical Philosophical Society*, Volume 7, 3-4).

Third, the dogmatic assertion that the existence of God both can and cannot be proved places Van Til in his own school of apologetics, which might be called the non-composmentist school of apologetics. Van Til the apologete does not live up to Van Til the legendary presuppositionalist either.

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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought

Reviewed by W. Gary Crampton

It must be said of John Frame, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Escondido, California), that he is a very brave man, a hearty soul. In his latest book, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*,¹ presented in celebration of Van Til's one hundredth birthday, Professor Frame, as the title suggests, attempts to codify the thoughts of his mentor. Earlier writings from the Trinity Foundation have pointed out not only the eclectic concepts of Frame,² but also the paradoxical thoughts of Van Til³ –writings that indicate that the professor's task is not possible. Undaunted, Frame has written some 400-plus pages in which he, to quote the back cover of this volume, "combines deep appreciation with incisive critical analysis of the renowned Westminster apologist's ideas."

The book is divided into six major parts, followed by two appendices (Appendix A is a reprint of Frame's review of *Classical Apologetics*, authored by Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley; Appendix B is

an article by Edmund Clowney on Van Til's preaching). Part One has to do with "Introductory Considerations." Here the author names some scholars who sympathize with Dr. Van Til and others who don't ("debunkers"), speaks about his method of analyzing Van Til, presents a warm and abbreviated history of "Van Til's life and character," and gives us his opinion regarding his mentor's "place in history." He concludes that although Herman Dooyeweerd and Gordon Clark were great Christian thinkers, Van Til is superior. In fact, says Frame, even though Van Til is not the most comprehensive, clearest, or influential thinker of our time, he is "perhaps the most important Christian thinker since [John] Calvin" (44). In this review, we will see if this superlative is justified.

On page 47 Frame makes the claim, not uncommon among Van Tilians, that Gordon "Clark gave to Aristotle's logic the same authority as Scripture." This is a caricature, at best. Rather, like Augustine before him, Clark taught that the laws of logic are the way God thinks, and that these laws are embedded in Scripture. On the same page, Frame writes:

Unlike Van Til, he [Clark] took the term *presupposition* to refer to a hypothesis that could not be ultimately proved, but which could be progressively verified by logical analysis. This indicates some unclarity in

¹ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (P & R Publishing, 1995).

² John W. Robbins, "A Christian Perspective on John Frame," *The Trinity Review*, Number 93.

³ Robbins, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth* and W. Gary Crampton, "Why I Am Not a Van Tilian," *The Trinity Review*, Number 103.

Clark's mind as to what the ultimate standard of proof really is. If the ultimate standard is God's revelation, then the presuppositions of the Christian faith not only are provable, but also are the criteria by which all other proofs are to be measured.

The unclear thinking here is not Clark's, but Frame's. By definition, that which is a *presupposition* is not provable. That would have to be a *postsupposition*. Or is Frame taking a Humpty-Dumpty view of words? Clark's point is that the axiom (or presupposition) of all Christian thinking is that the Bible is the Word of God. Axioms (or *presuppositions*) cannot be proved; if they could be proved, they would not be axioms. It is interesting, however, that Frame here, as he does later in this book (chapters 10, 14, and 23), acknowledges the fact that Van Til, who is touted as "Mr. Presuppositionalist," is not really a presuppositionalist after all. Why? Because, unlike Clark, he believes that there are proofs for the existence of God and the truth of his Word.

Part Two is entitled "The Metaphysics of Knowledge." According to Frame, this is the strongest part of Van Til's system. Here the author discusses "Van Til's view of the basic nature of human knowledge within a Christian worldview" (51). It also includes "his teaching about the nature of God, the Trinity, the Creator-creation distinction, and the necessity of presupposing God's revelation in all human thought" (398).

But is Van Til really orthodox in this area of Christian theism? What about, for instance, his doctrine of the Trinity? Van Til believed that God is at the same time both one person and three persons. As Frame says: "For Van Til, God is not simply a unity of persons; he is *a person*" (65, italics his). This, to be sure, is not the teaching of orthodox Christianity, which maintains that God is one in essence (or substance) and three in persons. As the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost."

Van Til denied that his concept of the Trinity was a contradiction, yet he "embraces with passion the idea of the apparently contradictory" nature of this view (67). Frame admits that his mentor's view is somewhat novel; he calls it "a very bold theological move" (65). But his attempt to clear up the "apparent contradiction" only aggravates the problem; he retreats with the incredible claim that the Bible is imprecise regarding this essential doctrine of Christianity: "Scripture itself often fails to be precise about the mysteries of the faith" (69). (As a point of interest, in this section [77-78] it becomes quite evident that Frame, and Van Til as well, believe that science can give us knowledge, *i.e.*, true facts and true laws. For a Biblical refutation of this, see Gordon Clark's *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God*.)

Then there is Van Til's concept of "analogical knowledge" (Chapter 7). He taught that all human knowledge is (and can only be) analogical to God's knowledge; there is no univocal point, no point of coincidence, between God's knowledge and man's knowledge. Propositions, then, cannot have the same meaning for God that they do for man. (As incredible as it may sound, Van Til even went so far as to deny that all truth, with regard to God, is propositional. He did not explain what the phrase "non-propositional truth" might mean.)

The problem here is that if there is no univocal point at which man's knowledge meets God's knowledge, then man can never know the truth. Why? Because God is omniscient, *i.e.*, he knows all truth. Hence, if man does not know what God knows, his ideas can never be true. Or, to say it another way, if Van Til's concept of analogical knowledge were true, then it would not be possible for man to do what Van Til calls on him to do, *i.e.*, "to think *God's thoughts* after him" (92). In fact, it would not be possible for his theory of analogy to be true.

Even though Frame denies it, Clark was correct when he maintained that Van Til's concept of analogical knowledge is much closer to that of Thomas Aquinas than Van Tilians are willing to admit. Such a view, if taken to its logical

conclusion, leads to skepticism. Simply stated, an analogy of the truth is not the truth.

The issue of analogical knowledge brings us to "The Clark Controversy" (chapter 8). In 1944, Cornelius Van Til and eleven other presbyters lodged a complaint against the action of the Presbytery of Philadelphia regarding the licensure and ordination of Gordon Clark in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. There were several matters involved in the "Complaint," but the major items had to do with analogical knowledge and "the incomprehensibility of God." Clark taught that there is a quantitative, but not a qualitative distinction between the contents of God's knowledge and the contents of man's knowledge; that is, the difference in knowledge is one of degree, not of kind. The twelve presbyters disagreed. They denied that there is a univocal point at which God's knowledge meets man's knowledge.

The controversy went on for some time. Finally the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church sided in favor of Clark. For an in depth study of the whole issue, one should read *The Clark-Van Til Controversy*,⁴ by Herman Hoeksema. Hoeksema's analysis of the debate is excellent. In it he exposes the errors of Van Til and his associates. Much to the credit of John Frame, he does criticize Van Til's approach to the Clark controversy. And he concludes the chapter by stating: "Clark and Van Til are together in heaven now. I am pleased to announce that they are reconciled" (113).

In Chapter 11, entitled "The Primacy of the Intellect," we find another flaw in Van Til. He and Frame oppose this principle as it is traditionally expressed by men such as Augustine, Calvin, Machen, and Clark. Van Til averred that there is a three-fold distinction between the powers of the soul: intellect, will, and emotion. According to Frame, Van Til posits that "the human intellect, will, and emotions" are "ontologically equal," but the intellect is "economically" primary (144). This view, as Hoeksema points out, has always been "strongly opposed" by Reformed theologians.⁵

Professor Frame, on the other hand, goes so far as to say that "I think it is advisable for Reformed theologians to avoid advocating the primacy of the intellect" (148). He considers "the traditional concept of the primacy of the intellect" to be "untenable" (170).

According to the Bible, however, the intellect is primary because a person is his mind, his soul, or his spirit. Persons have bodies and emotions, but persons are not bodies or emotions. As Clark and Augustine would say, the body is the instrument of the soul or spirit or mind, which is the person. As a man thinks (not emotes) in his heart, so is he. Revelation is conveyed, not to the body or emotions of man, but to his mind, by means of Biblical propositions. It is the mind (the intellect) of man that needs to be "transformed" (*Romans* 12:1, 2) and "girded up" (*1 Peter* 1:13). It is the mind of fallen man that is at "enmity" with God (*Colossians* 1:21). Men walk in "the futility of their mind" (*Ephesians* 4:17); they are "futile in their thoughts" (*Romans* 1:21).

Van Til embraced the "apparent contradictions" in the Bible. Perhaps this is due to his unbiblical view of logic. Van Til's deprecation of logic, not the misuse of logic, but logic itself, is well known.⁶ In chapter 12, Frame concedes that Van Til believes that many of the doctrines of Scripture are "apparently contradictory." Further, they are not able to be resolved before the bar of human reason. Whereas the Bible claims that "God is not the author of confusion" (*1 Corinthians* 14:33), and that there is nothing which is written in it that we "cannot read or understand" (*2 Corinthians* 1:13), Van Til even goes so far as to say that "all teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory" (159), *i.e.*, logically paradoxical.

Robert Reymond, in defense of a rational Christianity, argues against the irrationality of Van Til when he writes: "If such is the case [that all Christian truth will finally be paradoxical], [then] . . . it condemns at the outset as futile even the attempt at systematic (orderly) theology . . . since it

⁴ Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Trinity Foundation, 1995).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ See, for example, Robert Reymond, *Preach the Word* (Rutherford House, 1988), 16-35, and Ronald Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Zondervan, 1982), 99-101.

is impossible to reduce to a system irreconcilable paradoxes which steadfastly resist all attempts at harmonious systematization."⁷ In other words, if Van Til's view of logic and Scripture is taken to its logical conclusion, there could be no system of Biblical truth. At every point, Van Til's peculiar views undermine the Bible.

Sadly, Van Til and others have branded Gordon Clark a rationalist because he believed that we should refuse to accept the "apparent contradictions" found in the Bible. We should, taught Clark, attempt to solve the so-called "paradoxes," to harmonize Scripture with itself. The present reviewer agrees with Hoeksema when he writes: "There is here, indeed, something that is more than amazing, that is really unbelievable, that might almost be catalogued as another paradox: the phenomenon that theologians [Van Til and others] accuse a brother theologian of heresy because he tries to solve problems."⁸

Part Three of this volume is entitled "The Ethics of Knowledge." Here the author deals with Van Til's teaching regarding "the effects of the Fall upon our knowledge" (51). In his own words, Frame says: "I am rather more critical of him [Van Til] in this area than I was in the area of the metaphysics of knowledge" (187). He concludes that here we have "an area of both strength and weakness" (398).

Notably, Frame points out Van Til's inconsistency in positing his concept of the antithesis which exists between Christian and non-Christian thought: "My evaluation is that . . . these formulations are not altogether consistent with one another" (192). Frame doesn't say it, but this is a constant problem with Van Til. Inconsistencies abound.

In chapter 16 we come to Van Til's teaching about "Common Grace." Here again, his position is errant. This is especially true in his view of "the free offer of the Gospel." That is, Van Til speaks of a "well meant offer of salvation to a generality of men, including elect and non-elect" (220). Or to put it another way, Van Til believes that God sincerely

desires the salvation of those whom he has not foreordained to be saved.

John Frame, although he has some criticisms of his mentor in this area, likewise believes that "God wants all individuals to repent, whether or not he has foreordained them to do so" (223). Simply stated, this is preposterous. It is not conceivable that God sincerely seeks the salvation of those whom from eternity he has determined not to save. What is Frame's solution? Simple: "Here we must invoke Van Til's doctrines of paradox and analogical thinking" (223). Quite clever, eh? Whenever Van Tilians run into a problem they call it a paradox and move on. Call it whatever you like, it is irrational. Moreover, as Hoeksema correctly says, it is a form of incipient Arminianism.⁹

The final chapter of Part Three deals with "Rationalism and Irrationalism." Van Til taught that all non-Christian thought, contrary to Christian thought, consists of a constant dialectic of rationalism and irrationalism. It began in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, and it has been that way ever since. Frame writes: "In my view, Van Til's analysis of the history of non-Christian thought in terms of rationalism and irrationalism, together with its theological justification, is one of his best accomplishments. It is scripturally based in its accurate account of the Christian worldview and the unbeliever's negation of it. It is confirmed by analysis of the secular texts themselves" (236).

Part Four is entitled "The Argument for Christianity." In it the author shows "how, on Van Til's view, a believer should argue and defend the gospel to an unbeliever in the light of the metaphysics and ethics of knowledge" (51). But before we learn the "how" of Van Til's way, first we learn the "how not to." So chapters 18-21 give us Van Til's analysis and critique of "the traditional method" of the Church fathers (including Augustine), Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler, and Edward J. Carnell. According to Frame, there are positive and negative elements in Van Til's critique of these other systems of apologetics.

⁷ Reymond, *op. cit.*, 29.

⁸ Hoeksema, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁹ Hoeksema, *op. cit.*, chapters 9 and 10.

Then in chapter 22 we are told that the argument for Christianity must of necessity be circular or "spiral," always resting on the presupposition of God's revelation to man in the Bible. In Van Til's own words: "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. The starting-point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another" (302). In this sense, of course, what he says is correct.

Finally, in chapter 23, "Reasoning by Presupposition," in the words of the author, "we come now to Van Til's recommended methodology for apologetic witness. Here is, at last, his actual argument—his 'absolute certain proof' of Christian theism" (311).

As seen earlier, Van Til is not a presuppositionalist. Presuppositionalism, by definition, excludes the use of proofs for the presupposition. In his book, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth*, John Robbins cites numerous examples where Van Til speaks favorably concerning the proofs of God's existence. Writes Van Til:

"Men ought to reason analogically from nature to nature's God. Men ought, therefore, to use the cosmological argument analogically in order thus to conclude that God is the creator of this universe. . . . Men ought also to use the ontological argument analogically. . . . The argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity is objectively valid. We should not tone down the validity of this argument to the probability level. The argument may be poorly stated, and may never be adequately stated. But in itself the argument is absolutely sound. . . . Thus there is an absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism."¹⁰

These statements are noticeably Thomistic.

What is Van Til's "absolutely certain proof" of "Christian theism"? Says Frame, it is an "indirect" argument: the impossibility of the contrary. In Van Til's words: "The theistic proofs therefore reduce to one proof, the proof which argues that unless this God, the God of the Bible, the ultimate being, the Creator, the controller of the universe, be presupposed as the foundation of human experience, this experience operates in a void. This one proof is absolutely convincing" (313). Van Til seems to confuse "convincing" with "valid."

Van Til goes on: "The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument sake, in order to show him that on such a position the 'facts' are not facts and the 'laws' are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument sake in order that he may be shown that only on such a basis do 'facts' and 'laws' appear intelligible" (313, 314).

The problem here is that if the Christian is formulating his arguments on the presupposition of Biblical revelation, then there is no "theistic proof" at all. It is simply divine revelation, not an argument for God or his Word. Hence, to suggest, as Van Til and some of his disciples do, that the traditional "theistic proofs" can be reformulated in a Biblical fashion, under which they are valid, is absurd.

On the other hand, if the transcendental argument is being used as an *ad hominem* argument, *i.e.*, a *reductio ad absurdum*, then again it proves nothing with regard to the truth of Christian theism. Reducing the opponent's arguments to absurdity, thereby showing him the futility of his own method, is an excellent apologetical tool. But it does not prove the truthfulness of the Christian system. In fact, if all other "systems" could be shown to be false, this would still not prove Christianity to be true. Van Til and his disciples are confused.

What, then, is the conclusion? The "absolutely certain proof" of the "transcendental method" is non-existent. There is no proof for God and his Word. A Christian epistemology begins with the Bible as the Word of God; this is the

¹⁰ Robbins, *Van Til*, 13.

indemonstrable axiom, from which all true theories are to be deduced. Being an axiom, it cannot be proved. If it could be proved, it would not be the starting point. Why do we have to keep repeating the obvious for the benefit of the Van Tilians?

In Part Five we read about "Van Til as Critic." Here the author studies "Van Til's offensive apologetics, his critical analysis of unbelieving systems and of the influence of unbelief upon Christian theology" (51). Writes Frame: "Van Til is at his worst in his critiques of other thinkers, but even here he provides valuable insight" (399). In this section, which will not be analyzed by this reviewer, we have Van Til's interaction with "Greek Philosophy and Scholasticism," Immanuel Kant and Karl Barth, and Herman Dooyeweerd. Suffice it to say, in Frame's own words, here Van Til "does point out 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" (400).

Finally, in Part Six we come to "Conclusions." Chapter 28 is an interesting study of "Van Til's Successors," which includes his immediate successors, the Theonomists, as well as some others. Then in chapter 29, "Van Til and Our Future," the author gives us a summary of his conclusions. He is critical in some areas, but supportive in most. "I believe, therefore," says the author, "that we can learn much that is good and valuable from Van Til without being slavish devotees. It is not necessary for the Van Tilian movement to maintain a movement mentality. Nor is it necessary to stand in stark antithesis against all our fellow Christians who have thus far not joined that movement" (400).

Conclusion

Among other things, Professor Frame has concluded that Van Til "is perhaps the most important Christian thinker since Calvin." He is not alone with such a superlative statement. Van Til has been called "undoubtedly the greatest defender of the Christian faith in our century." It has been said that "in every area of thought, the philosophy of

Cornelius Van Til is of critical and central importance." Other of his admirers say that Van Til "is a legendary giant," "of unquestioned orthodoxy."¹¹

But, as we have seen, these comments are unwarranted. It turns out that a great deal of Van Til's teaching is far from "unquestioned orthodoxy." It does not pass the Berean test of *Acts* 17:11. Worse, much of Van Til's thought is not only errant, but dangerously so. Robbins has said it well: "Let us turn from Van Tilianism and 'embrace with passion' the Scriptural ideals of clarity in both thought and speech; let us recognize, with Christ and the Westminster Assembly, the indispensability of logic; let us believe and teach, with Augustine and Athanasius, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity; and let us defend the consistency and intelligibility of the Bible. Then, and only then, will Christianity have a bright and glorious future in America and throughout the Earth."¹²

¹¹ Cited in Robbins, *Van Til*, 1, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

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Why I Am Not a Van Tilian

W. Gary Crampton

It was Dr. Kenneth Talbot who first introduced me to the writings of Gordon Clark. In seminary I had been taught the Van Tilian system of apologetics, and in comparison with evidentialism, it seemed to be a breath of fresh air. Further, as one Reformed scholar assured me: "To be Reformed is to be Van Tilian, and to be Van Tilian is to be Reformed."

Yet, as impolitic as it was to challenge the teachings of Dr. Van Til, his system left me without answers to far too many questions; it produced a strange melange of logical antinomies. How can one be a presuppositionalist and still believe that there are proofs for the existence of God? How can one be in the orthodox camp of Christianity and maintain that the God of Scripture is both one person and three persons? How can one read and understand the Scriptures if there are so many humanly irresolvable contradictions in them? How can one stand for the Christian faith and at the same time endorse a form of irrationalism? The answer to all of my questions was simple: One can't. And neither does one have to. It was Clark, through Talbot, who pointed this out.

But it is not only Clark who has seen the errors in Van Til's teachings. Drs. Robert Reymond and Ronald Nash have also recognized the irrationalism of Van Til. And it is Clark's disciple, Dr. John Robbins, who has given us the fullest criticism of Van Tilianism to date. In the opinion of this writer, an honest reading of Robbins' book, followed by a

serious study of both Van Til's and Clark's works, will convince the reader that Van Tilianism is an error. There are few, however, who are willing to study the issue seriously. They have already made up their minds, and their attitude seems to be, "Don't confuse me with the facts."

Presuppositionalism

Where is it that Van Til has gone astray? Using Robbins' book as a guide, I will begin with Van Til's view of presuppositional apologetics. Presuppositionalism, by definition, excludes the use of proofs for the existence of God. Not so, however, with Dr. Van Til. Here indeed is a paradox: Dr. Van Til, who is frequently touted as "Mr. Presuppositionalist," is not a presuppositionalist. For example, he writes,

Men ought to reason analogically from nature to nature's God. Men ought, therefore, to use the cosmological argument analogically in order thus to conclude that God is the creator of this universe.... Men ought also to use the ontological argument analogically.... The argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity is objectivity valid. We should not tone down the validity of this argument to the probability level. The argument may be poorly stated, and may never be adequately stated. But in itself the argument is absolutely sound....

Thus there is an absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism (13).

These statements sound like Thomism.

At the same time, with his flair for dialectical reasoning, Van Til rejects the proofs of God's existence: "Of course Reformed believers do not seek to prove the existence of their God. To seek to prove or to disprove the existence of this God would be to seek to deny him.... A God whose existence is proved is not the God of Scripture" (14). But this is the same God whose existence Dr. Van Til has also told us can be proved.

The Trinity

As the arrangement of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* would indicate, apart from the doctrine of Scripture (*WCF* 1), the most fundamental doctrine of Christianity is that of the Trinity (*WCF* 2). Orthodoxy maintains, as so clearly set forth by the *Confession*, that "in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost" (2:3).

Dr. Van Til demurs. He writes:

We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.... We must maintain that God is numerically one, He is one person.... We speak of God as a person; yet we speak also of three persons in the Godhead.... God is a one-conscious being, and yet he is also a tri-conscious being.... [T]he work ascribed to any of the persons is the work of one absolute person.... We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.... [W]e must therefore hold that God's being presents an absolute numerical identity. And even within the ontological Trinity we must maintain that God is numerically one. He is one person (18-19).

Lamentably, this peculiar teaching has spread. John Frame, a disciple of Van Til and professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary,

also says that "Scripture...does refer to God as one person" (20). Speaking of the Trinity, Van Tilian Gary North writes: "*We* are not dealing with one uniform being; we are dealing with Persons who constitute a Person." David Chilton, another follower of Van Til, has written: "The doctrine of the Trinity is that there is one God (one Person) who is three distinct Persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and that each of those Persons is Himself God. There are not three Gods – only One. Yet those three Persons are not different ways or modes of God making Himself known to us, nor are they to be confused with one another; they are three distinct Persons. Cornelius Van Til states it about as clearly as anyone has...."

One of Van Til's more creative and imaginative disciples, James Jordan, has added another twist: While Van Til, Frame, and North state that God is one person and three persons, Jordan adds tri-theism. God, says Jordan, is one essence and three essences. He writes; "First of all, God is One and Three in essence. The Father and the Son are One; the Father and the Spirit are One; the Son and the Spirit are One; and the Three are One. This is a mystery, and is an ontological or metaphysical reality. But second, the Father, Son, and Spirit are each persons, and they exist in Society. There are relationships between them." Jordan's one and three essences are another deviation from Christian orthodoxy, and the notion is as Biblically and logically fallacious as saying that God is one person and three persons.

Now it is simply jejune to argue, as some have done, that these are merely "apparent contradictions." These are irreconcilable contradictions. It is a violation of the law of contradiction to say that God is one person and three persons, or one essence and three essences, at the same time and in the same respect. But this is precisely what Van Til taught and many of his disciples are teaching. It is a strange alchemy that can make $1 = 3$ and $3 = 1$.

The Bible

Dr. Van Til is well known for his assertion that the Bible is full of logical paradoxes, apparent

contradictions, or antinomies. In fact, he avers that "all teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory" (25). This is due, first of all, to his attitude toward logic. Whereas the Westminster divines had a high view of logic, Van Til did not. The *Confession*, for example, states that "the whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (1:6). Logic, says the *Confession*, is a necessary tool to be used in the study and exposition of the Word of God.

Van Til, on the other hand, almost always speaks of logic (not the misuse of logic, but logic itself) in a disparaging manner. For example, he speaks of "logicism" and "the static categories of logic." And with reference to the *Confession's* statement quoted above, Van Til says: "This statement should not be used as a justification for deductive exegesis" (24-25). But deductive exegesis is exactly what the Westminster divines were endorsing.

In a chapter entitled "The Religious Revolt Against Logic," Ronald Nash writes, "I once asked Van Til if, when some human being knows that 1 plus 1 equals 2, that human being's knowledge is identical with God's knowledge. The question, I thought, was innocent enough. Van Til's only answer was to smile, shrug his shoulders, and declare that the question was improper in the sense that it had no answer. It had no answer because any proposed answer would presume what is impossible for Van Til, namely, that laws like those found in mathematics and logic apply beyond the [Dooyeweerdian] Boundary" (100). In other words, Van Til, like Herman Dooyeweerd, assumed that the laws of logic are created.

It is true that in some places Van Til implies that logic is not created. But in other places he says the opposite, that is, that logic is created. And the difference is not explained by saying that Van Til changed his views; that would be fine. Rather, it is part of the Van Tilian paradox.

Van Tilian Richard Pratt is of the same opinion. He writes: "Because logic is a part of creation, it has

limitations.... Christianity is at points reasonable and logical, but logic meets the end of its ability when it comes to matters like the incarnation of Christ, and the doctrine of the Trinity." Apparently the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity, key Christian doctrines to say the least, are illogical. Edwin H. Palmer believes they are. Regarding the doctrine of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, Palmer writes in his book, *The Five Points of Calvinism*: "Over against these humanistic views, the Calvinist accepts both sides of the antinomy. He realizes that what he advocates is ridiculous.... And the Calvinist freely admits that his position is illogical, ridiculous, nonsensical, and foolish" (85). Of course, if Van Til and Pratt are correct in their assertions that logic is created, then God could not think logically; neither could he give us a rational revelation.

Thankfully, they are not correct. As Clark has pointed out time and again in his writings, the laws of logic are the way God thinks, and he has given us a rational revelation by which to live. In fact, Clark states, Jesus calls himself the *Logos* (word from which we get "logic") of God in *John* 1. He is Logic incarnate, and if we are to think in a manner that pleases God, we must think as Christ does: logically.

With his faulty view of logic, it is not surprising that Van Til believes that the Bible is full of "apparent contradictions." The Bible says that God is not the author of confusion (*1 Corinthians* 14:33), but Van Til says that "all teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory" (25). The *Westminster Confession* (1:5) speaks of "the consent of all the parts" of Scripture, but Van Til maintains that "since God is not fully comprehensible to us we are bound to come into what seems to be a contradiction in all our knowledge" (26). Van Til and his disciples revel in the notion that the Bible is full of logical (that is, irreconcilable) paradoxes. He writes: "While we shun as poison the idea of the really contradictory, we embrace with passion the idea of the apparently contradictory" (26). The difficulty is that Van Til gave us no test by which we might distinguish between a real and an apparent contradiction.

In his defense of a rational Christianity, Robert Reymond argues against Van Til's concept of Biblical paradox; "If such is the case [that all Christian truth will finally be paradoxical], [then]... it condemns at the outset as futile even the attempt at systematic (orderly) theology... since it is impossible to reduce to a system irreconcilable paradoxes which steadfastly resist all attempts at harmonious systematization" (29). In other words, if Van Til's view of Scripture is taken to its logical conclusion, there could be no system of Biblical truth.

There are indeed parts of Scripture that are "hard to understand" (2 *Peter* 3:16), but there is none impossible to understand. Such a "revelation" would not be a revelation at all. Gordon Clark, who trenchantly argued against the confusion espoused by Van Til, defined a paradox as "a charley-horse between the ears that can be eliminated by rational massage."

The root of the problem here is Van Til's belief that all human knowledge is (and can only be) analogical to God's knowledge. Writes Van Til: "Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical" (26). Reymond writes that "what this means for Van Til is the express rejection of any and all qualitative coincidence between the content of God's mind and the content of man's mind" (20). Reymond is correct. And this is a fatal error.

Clark, however, corrects the error. "To avoid this irrationalism...we must insist that truth is the same for God and man. Naturally, we may not know the truth about some matters. But if we know anything at all, what we know must be identical with what God knows. God knows all truth, and unless we know something God knows, our ideas are untrue. It is absolutely essential, therefore, to insist that there is an area of coincidence between God's mind and our mind. One example, as good as any, is... [that] David was king of Israel."

Clark, of course, is not denying that there is a difference in degree between God's knowledge and our knowledge -- that is, God always knows more than man does. What he is denying is Van Til's assertion that there is no point at which our

knowledge is God's knowledge. That is, there must be a univocal point where truth in the mind of man coincides with truth in the mind of God. (The difference in knowledge, then, is one of degree, not of kind.) Without this univocal point, man could never know truth. Man could not, to use Van Til's own phrase, "think God's thought after him," unless God's knowledge and the knowledge possible to man coincide at some point.

Van Til's faulty view of human analogical knowledge entails skepticism. Van Til himself wrote:

It is precisely because they [the colleagues and followers of Van Til] are concerned to defend the Christian doctrine of revelation as basic to all intelligible human predication that they refuse to make any attempt at "stating clearly" any Christian doctrine, or the relation of any one Christian doctrine to any other Christian doctrine. They will not attempt to "solve" the "paradoxes" involved in the relationship of the self-contained God to his dependent creatures (27-28).

John Frame is in agreement with Van Til. Frame seems to defend Van Til's view of analogical language when he proposes his "multiperspectival" approach to theology. Frame points out that "Scripture, for God's good reasons, is often vague." Perhaps Frame has the parables in mind. But he goes on to draw an invalid inference. "Therefore," he concludes in an obvious *non sequitur*, "there is no way of escaping vagueness in theology, creed, or subscription without setting Scripture aside as our ultimate criterion." Frame, like the rest of the Van Tilian school, is very concerned to do away with precision in thought in favor of vagueness.

"Scripture," says Frame, "does not demand absolute precision of us, a precision impossible for creatures.... Indeed, Scripture recognizes that for sake of communication, vagueness is often preferable to precision.... Nor is theology an attempt to state truth without any subjective influence on the formulation." One might ask how it is that vagueness, rather than precision, in theology, or any

other thing for that matter, is good? – a logical question. Ah, but there is the rub. It is a *logical* question.

Apparently the Van Tilians have forgotten the Reformed doctrine of the clarity of Scripture. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* expresses it this way: "All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them" (1:7).

David clearly assures us that the "commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes" (*Psalms* 19:8); Christ clearly is concerned that his church pay heed to the meticulous details of the Word of God (*Matthew* 5:17-20); Peter clearly tells us that as we study the "prophetic Word" it will be as a light that shines in a dark place, shining brighter and brighter, "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in [our] hearts" (2 *Peter* 1:19); and John clearly writes, "We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know him who is true" (1 *John* 5:20); but Professors Van Til and Frame are content with vagueness and imprecision. And what is worse, it seems that Van Til and Frame not only assert that there are parts of Scripture that are irrational, but defend it as properly irrational.

Dr. Robbins has correctly stated that "there is no greater threat facing the Christian church at the end of the twentieth century than the irrationalism that now controls our entire culture.... Hedonism and secular humanism are not to be feared nearly so much as the belief that logic, 'mere human logic,' is an untrustworthy tool for understanding the Bible.... The more conservative seminaries already have fallen or are falling prey to irrationalism and heresy in the form of Van Tilianism.... The ministers have been taught that irrationalism is Christianity. Those theologians who have accepted Van Til's views believe that Christianity is irrational" (39).

Conclusion

Cornelius Van Til has been extolled as a man whose insights "are life-transforming and world-transforming;" he is "undoubtedly the greatest defender of the Christian faith in our century;" his "contribution to theology is of virtually Copernican dimensions;" he is "a thinker of enormous power, combining unquestioned orthodoxy with dazzling originality;" he is "perhaps the most important Christian thinker of the twentieth century" (1-2).

Yet, when one searches the Scriptures to see if the distinctive teachings of Van Til are true (*Acts* 17:11), all too frequently he will find that they are not. Worse, as I trust we have seen, some of them are dangerously wrong. Van Til's thoughts may be "original," but it is truth and not originality that should characterize Christian theology.

I have in no way attempted to distort or misrepresent the teachings of Cornelius Van Til. (Nor is the piety of the man being questioned.) Each reader must judge for himself the accuracy of the statements made here, and their necessary implications. Read Robbins' book, as I did, and check the references; read Clark's books as well; then judge.

If this essay offends anyone, I am sorry. But it is more important that truth be made known, even if feelings are hurt. Let us not be at enmity one with another because I have sought to tell you the truth (*Galatians* 4:16). I am not a Van Tilian, because Van Tilianism is not true. It is a body of thought that militates against the truth; it does not support it.

Robbins has said it well: "Let us turn from Van Tilianism and 'embrace with passion' the Scriptural ideals of clarity in both thought and speech; let us recognize, with Christ and the Westminster Assembly, the indispensability of logic; let us believe and teach, with Augustine and Athanasius, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity; and let us defend the consistency and intelligibility of the Bible. Then, and only then, will Christianity have a bright and glorious future in America and throughout the Earth." (40).