

**Van Til**  
**His Life And Thought**

Presented to The Academy

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May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2007

*“Van Til is perhaps the most important  
Christian thinker of the twentieth-century.”*

*– John Frame*

## *Part One – Biography*

Cornelius Van Til was born on May 3, 1895 in Grootegost, Holland. In 1905 he and his family moved to a farm in Highland Indiana. There he showed a high level of intellectual potential, learning English in a year. In 1914 at the age of nineteen, he enrolled at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.<sup>1</sup> Upon completing his undergraduate degree, he enrolled in Calvin Theological Seminary in 1921, but remained there for only one year. While at Calvin, Van Til became familiar with the work of the Dutch reformed theologians, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavink, as well as studied systematic theology under Louis Berkhof, and Christian philosophy under W. H. Jellema.<sup>2</sup> After his first year at Calvin Theological Seminary, he transferred to Princeton, where he continued his studies at Princeton Theological Seminary while also pursuing a Master's degree in philosophy at Princeton University. While at Princeton, his advisor was C. W. Hodge Jr., Charles Hodges' grandson and B.B. Warfield's successor. Geerhardus Vos was teaching at the Seminary as well, and Van Til developed a close friendship with him and maintained a special admiration for him throughout his life (Van Til preached Vos' funeral sermon in 1949).<sup>3</sup> In 1925 he received his Th.M from Princeton Theological Seminary, and married his childhood sweetheart the following year; in 1927 he received his Ph.D from the University at Princeton.<sup>4</sup> Upon completing his Ph.D, Van Til took up the pastorate of a church in Spring Lake Michigan. However, after being there for only one year, during the academic year of 1928-29 he took a leave of absence in order to teach a course on apologetics at Princeton Seminary. Upon completing the course, he was offered a full professorship in apologetics, as he had made such an impression on the faculty there, though he was himself the youngest instructor.<sup>5</sup> However it was also at this time that Princeton was undergoing "reorganization" as a result of the Auburn Affirmation in 1924. Unwilling to have anything to do with the seminary in its embracing of theological liberalism, and wanting to return to his church, he declined the offer.<sup>6</sup> It was at this same time that J.

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<sup>1</sup> John Frame. *Cornelius Van Til, An Analysis of His Thought* (p. 19).

<sup>2</sup> Greg Bahnsen. *Van Til's Apologetic, Readings and Analysis* (p. 8).

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* (p. 8)

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* (p. 9)

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* (p. 10)

<sup>6</sup> John Frame. *Cornelius Van Til, An Analysis of His Thought* (p. 22-23).

Gresham Machen and others were leaving Princeton and forming plans to open a new academic institution that would uphold the beliefs of historic orthodox Christianity. Machen wanted Van Til to join them on the faculty, and after much correspondence, and multiple personal visits, Van Til finally accepted the offer just days before Westminster Theological Seminary held its opening ceremonies in Philadelphia.<sup>7</sup> Van Til remained on the faculty at Westminster from 1929 to 1972. At which time he retired, although he continued to teach classes on a part time basis. And on April 17, 1987, Cornelius Van Til passed away a few weeks before his 92nd birthday.<sup>8</sup>

### **Works**

During his career Van Til wrote many books that were published as well as many syllabi, some of which were later published but many of which were not. Most of Van Til's work addressed his major ideas concerning theology and apologetics. His first major work was a criticism of the thought of Karl Barth which he published in 1946, *The New Modernism - An Appraisal of the Thought of Barth and Brunner*. In 1947 he published *Common Grace*. And it was in 1955 that he published his work *The Defense of the Faith*, which is by far his most comprehensive single publication in which he addresses the issue of apologetics, laying out his ideas on the subject. In 1964 he wrote another critique of Barth, *Christianity and Barthianism*, and in 1969 he published *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, which was adapted and expanded from one of his syllabi. During the sixties and seventies he published several other works as well. Of his works that were never published, a few that are considered some of the most important are: *Christian Apologetics*, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, *Christian-Theistic Ethics*, and *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*. His one work that he wrote specifically addressed to unbelievers is a pamphlet entitled *Why I Believe In God*, which is completely unlike any of his other works, but in which he puts forth in summary fashion all of his major ideas as addressed to an unbeliever, which makes it both very unique and very important among his collected works.

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<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* (p. 23-24)

<sup>8</sup> Greg Bahnsen. *Van Til's Apologetic, Readings and Analysis* (p. 19-20).

## *Van Til as a person*

One of the challenges that has always enshrouded Van Til and his ideas in controversy is that while he was prolific in his thinking, he was lacking in terms of clarity and succinctness in his writing. The result has been a lack of understanding of what Van Til actually taught, as well as massive misinterpretation of his ideas. While those critical of Van Til have been many, those who have criticized him for positions he actually held and ideas he actually taught have been significantly less. This must, at least in part, be attributed to Van Til's own lack of ability to organize and present his ideas in a clear manner. Additionally, Van Til was not interested in winning any popularity contests. Inexorably critical of those with whom he disagreed, Van Til was not prone to make light of differences he had with others, or in any way gloss over them. Rather he was at times quite harsh with his opponents, as well as with students in his classroom that took a dissenting position from his.<sup>9</sup> Van Til taught in such a way that "every intellectual issue became a matter of loyalty to the Scriptures and the Reformed Standards, and any deviation became a concession to non-Christian thought."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps because he saw the interrelated nature of theology, he was always thinking how a minuscule mistake in one area, if followed through consistently, would destroy the whole system. If this is the case then the harshness with which he dealt with those opposed to him is at least understandable, if not commendable.

## *Part Two – General Overview of Important Theological Distinctives*

### *Metaphysics*

Van Til's metaphysical formulation of reality can be illustrated in a quite simple and straightforward manner. Van Til would often in his classes draw a large circle on the blackboard then another, smaller circle directly beneath the larger one. The large circle representative of God the Creator and the small circle representative of the

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* (p. 30)

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* (p. 30)

creation, with two lines connecting the circles representing providence and revelation.<sup>11</sup> Van Til began with the doctrine of creation and the need for a proper understanding of the distinction between the Creator and the creation. Van Til would then draw a single circle on the board, representing all non-Christian thought. He said that the non-Christian will ultimately make all aspects of reality equal with all the rest of reality; thus if God exists, he exists on the same level as everyone else. God must either be lowered to the level of man or else man must be raised to the level of God. Either way, on a non-Christian account of metaphysics, all reality is equal:

It is exceedingly dangerous to confuse the orthodox concept of the incomprehensibility of God with the ultimate mysteriousness of the universe as held by modern thought. Modern thought in general, and modern logic in particular, holds...that God is, at most, an aspect of Reality as a whole. Hence, God is himself surrounded by darkness or mystery, just as man is surrounded by darkness or mystery... It is difficult to think of two types of thought that are more radically opposed to one another. It is the most fundamental antithesis conceivable in the field of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

But this is not so on the Christian “two-circle” model. There is a stress on the distinctiveness of God from all else that exists; the world is not equal and on par with its Creator, and by His very nature He relates to the world as its sovereign Creator and Lord. On this metaphysical model God does not occupy an elected office; rather, he has all authority and as such He has every right to speak to us with unchallengeable authority:

If everything is made by God, then everything belongs to Him and is used rightly only when it is used according to His will. Not only so, but if God is the source of all life then meaning derives from Him in much the same way as it is the artist who can say definitively what the work of art means.<sup>13</sup>

Van Til believed and taught that a distinctively Christian “two-circle” view of metaphysics will necessitate a correspondingly Christian view of epistemology. For if we serve a God who has created all, knows everything perfectly and speaks to us with

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<sup>11</sup> John Frame. *Cornelius Van Til, An Analysis of His Thought* (p. 53).

<sup>12</sup> Van Til. *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*.

<sup>13</sup> Wells. *Above All Earthly Powers* (p. 255).

all authority, then when we formulate answers to questions concerning (a) what kinds of things we can know, and (b) how it is that we can have knowledge of them, we will necessarily have a view of epistemology that is distinctively Christian in nature.

### *Epistemology*

With the recognition of the Creator/creature distinction, Van Til taught that certain other beliefs correspond with this metaphysical model. As we approach the subject of epistemology we must recognize a distinction between God's knowledge as Creator and our knowledge as creatures.<sup>14</sup> God is original, independent, self-sufficient, self-contained, infinite, and exists necessarily; while man is derivative, dependent, finite and contingent. Knowledge thus, according to Van Til, is analogical in nature, albeit not in the Thomistic sense of the word (Aquinas' Doctrine of Analogy). Rather, what Van Til means by our knowledge being analogical to God's knowledge is that since we are subject to, and dependent on the Sovereign Creator and Lord of everything, and since we have been made in His image that we might be a reflection of Him on a finite level, we are to "think God's thoughts after Him:"

*By this [analogical thinking] is meant that God is the original and man is the derivative. God has absolute self-contained system within himself...But man, as God's creature, cannot have a replica of that system of God...He must, to be sure, think God's thoughts after Him; but this means that he must, in seeking to form his own system, constantly be subject to the authority of God's system to the extent that this is revealed to him.*<sup>15</sup>

God as the Creator of all things knows all things perfectly, by virtue of the fact that he has full self-knowledge and He knows everything that he has done in creation fully and exhaustively. Thus there is no true proposition P such that God does not know P. Because of God's relation of complete authority to the creation, it is also He who interprets the meaning of all things. Thus rather than the common phrase "as a man thinks, so is he," it may properly be said, "As God thinks of a thing, so is it." Thus any knowledge that we might have of ourselves, the world around us or of things unseen;

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<sup>14</sup> "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." – Isaiah 55.8-9 (All Biblical quotations from: *The Holy Bible – English Standard Version*.)

<sup>15</sup> Van Til. *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (p. 16). Emphasis his

of necessity must be conformed to God's knowledge of the given object, since it is He who determines and interprets all things. In other words, if you have knowledge of something, it is only insofar as your knowledge reflects, or is conformed to, God's knowledge.

What this means is that all knowledge is revelational, either as part of general or special revelation; every true thing that can be known, can only be known insofar as it is revealed by Him from whom all knowledge flows:<sup>16</sup>

In this view, it is not the human being reaching up to seize the meaning of life, or gazing into itself for that meaning, but God reaching down to explain life's meaning. *In this understanding there can be no speaking of God, no speaking of meaning, before His speaking to us is heard.*<sup>17</sup>

"Knowing" on the non-Christian "one-circle" metaphysical model cannot then be analogical in Van Til's sense of "thinking God's thoughts after Him." It cannot be seen as seeking to be reflective of and conformed to the mind and thoughts of God. Rather, "knowing" is considered only to be an individual's exercise of personal autonomy. Thus the creature is made the ultimate reference point, the ultimate standard and determiner of truth. This is not to say that the would-be autonomous mind does not accept knowledge on the basis of authority outside himself (science, history, logic etc...). But ultimately it is the individual who will interpret and evaluate these "facts," and thus as the final interpreter it is the individual who has the final authority. This notion of autonomy is clearly articulated and proudly professed by anti-theists such as the French Existentialist Jean-Paul Sarte:

If an angel comes to me, what proof is there that it's an angel? And if I hear voices, what proof is there that they come from heaven and not from hell, or from the subconscious, or a pathological condition? What proves that they are addressed to me? What proof is there that I have been appointed to impose my choice and my conception of man on humanity? *I'll never find any proof or sign to convince me of that. If a voice addresses me, it*

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<sup>16</sup> "That their hearts may be encouraged. Being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" – Colossians 2.2-3

<sup>17</sup> Wells. *Above All Earthly Powers* (p. 203-204). Emphasis mine

*is always for me to decide that this is the angel's voice; if I consider that such an act is a good one, it is I who will choose to say that it is good rather than bad.*<sup>18</sup>

Or as Paul Tillich succinctly states, "If one has to choose between different authorities, not *they* but *oneself* is the ultimate authority for oneself, and this means: there is no authority for him."<sup>19</sup> Instead of allowing "the Truth" (John 14:6) to interpret and explain reality, man exchanges the Truth for a lie (Rom 1). From the very beginning the question becomes, "who has ultimate authority? Who is properly and rightfully able to judge, interpret and evaluate reality?" And from the very beginning there are two opposing answers given. Thus from the very beginning, antithetical to one another in their fundamental views of reality and authority, the believer and the non-believer part ways.

### *Presuppositions*

What are presuppositions, and what do they have to do with apologetics? First of all it should be pointed out that although the apologetic method that was outlined and defended by Van Til bears the name "Presuppositionalism," that name was not coined by him. He used it to reference his apologetic method for the sake of convention, as others had begun using it to describe his method.<sup>20</sup> Van Til himself did not use the term very much, possibly to prevent any connections being drawn between his theories and idealist thought which uses the notion of "presuppositions" quite heavily. Although Van Til never offered a definition of the term, he uses it most often as referring to a "basic heart-commitment"<sup>21</sup> or that which a person is ultimately committed to. This plays a very important role in our consideration of epistemology since what we are ultimately committed to will determine the criteria or standard by which "truth and falsity" and "right and wrong" are determined. "As long as we consistently maintain our ultimate commitment, we cannot accept anything as true or right that conflicts with that commitment."<sup>22</sup> 'Presupposition' is also used in Van Til to

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<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre. *Existentialism* (p. 19-20). Emphasis mine

<sup>19</sup> Paul Tillich, *The New Being*.

<sup>20</sup> Frame. *Van Til An Analysis of His Thought* (p. 131).

<sup>21</sup> Frame. *Van Til An Analysis of His Thought* (p. 136).

<sup>22</sup> Frame. *Van Til An Analysis of His Thought* (p. 136).

refer to one idea or belief that presupposes another idea or belief. This is referring to a presupposition as a necessary precondition for the truth or meaningfulness of something else. "If x presupposes y, then y is that to which a person must be committed, if he is to give an intelligible account of x."<sup>23</sup> It is in this sense that we are to understand Van Til in speaking of the non-believer "presupposing" the truth of Christian theism even in his opposition to it. "The standard of self-contradiction taken for granted by antitheistic thought presupposes the absolute for its operation. Antitheism presupposes theism. One must stand upon the solid ground of theism to be an effective antitheist."<sup>24</sup> Thus by "presupposition" we should not take Van Til to mean an arbitrarily selected starting point ascribed to blindly, nor as something that is unprovable. On the contrary, Van Til believed Christian presuppositions to be capable of the strongest form of proof, and all non-Christian presuppositions to be capable of being shown not only to be false, but completely impossible and self-refuting. Thus in emphasizing ultimate commitments, Van Til is not advocating a form of fideism,<sup>25</sup> which many people have accused him of doing.

### *The charge of circularity and the nature of transcendental argumentation*

After a person has gained a cursory understanding of the basics of Van Til's apologetic methodology, often the objection is raised that Van Til is fallaciously arguing in a circle. Circular reasoning assumes what it is trying to prove and Van Til and his method have often been accused of doing just that. How can we begin apologetics with the presupposition that God exists and the Bible is His inspired, inerrant revelation? Is that not precisely what we are attempting to convince non-believers of? This objection expresses a misunderstanding of Van Til on the part of the objector. Van Til himself admitted that there is inherent circularity on some level to his method, but that every system of thought is circular when arguing to establish its most fundamental presuppositions. In other words, when arguing for one's ultimate authority, one cannot appeal to some additional authority towards that end. For then it would be *that*

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<sup>23</sup> Frame. *Van Til An Analysis of His Thought* (p. 137).

<sup>24</sup> Van Til. *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*.

<sup>25</sup> Fideism is the "exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth." (Alvin Plantinga. *Reason and Belief in God* [p. 87].)

authority which would truly be ultimate. “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.”<sup>26</sup> The misunderstanding on the part of those who accuse Van Til of vicious circularity is a failure to recognize what and *how* Van Til argues. The answer to this objection can be seen clearly by comparing different methods of argumentation.

Deductive arguments attempt to prove a conclusion by showing that it is logically implied from a set of true premises, such that if the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true.<sup>27</sup> Inductive arguments are a weaker form of argumentation. An inductive argument is one that amasses a large amount of evidence in support of a conclusion in order to show that the conclusion has a high probability of being true.<sup>28</sup> It is very important to understand that Van Til is *not* arguing either deductively or inductively for Christian theism; rather, the presuppositional method is a *transcendental* argument. A transcendental argument begins with any statement or belief, and asks “what must be true, for this belief to be true?” Or in other words, what are the preconditions of intelligibility for any held belief?<sup>29</sup> Van Til’s argument is not that the truth of Christianity is deductively derived from other truths, nor that the truth of Christianity is made very probable on the basis of certain evidences. Rather the argument for the truth of Christianity is that Christianity and Christianity alone, provides the preconditions for the intelligibility of all knowledge and experience:

Therefore the claim must be made that Christianity alone is reasonable for men to hold. And it is utterly reasonable. It is wholly irrational to hold to any other position than that of Christianity. Christianity alone does not

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<sup>26</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (p. 101). (emphasis his)

<sup>27</sup> Example of a deductive argument where the truth of the premises guarantee the truth of the conclusion:

Premise 1 – All men are mortal

Premise 2 – Socrates is a man

Conclusion – Socrates is mortal

<sup>28</sup> Example of an inductive argument where the likelihood of the conclusion is equal to the persuasiveness of the evidence:

- I dropped my book 9 times and each time it fell to the ground

- it is likely that if I drop my book again it will fall to the ground

- (notice that if I had dropped the book 90,000 times, and each time it had fallen to the ground, the likelihood of the conclusion would be much greater)

<sup>29</sup> Bahnsen. *Always ready* (p. 121).

crucify reason itself...The best, the only, the absolutely certain proof of the truth of Christianity is that unless its truth be presupposed there is no proof of anything. Christianity is proved as being the very foundation of the idea of proof itself.<sup>30</sup>

So then, what exactly does a transcendental argument look like? And how does it provide an answer to the objection of circularity? A great example that can help shed some light on this is the example from logic. Can a proof be given that demonstrates the truth of the laws of logic? From the very beginning there is a problem; how can one demonstrate that the laws of logic are true, without using logic in the proof and thereby presupposing the very thing one is trying to prove? There is an inherent circularity involved here that is unavoidable. It would be utterly preposterous to suggest that the laws of logic could somehow be inductively supported by evidenced occasions of logic “working,” or that logic could be deduced from true and valid premises, since deduction and induction themselves presuppose logic. Thus, logic is established by demonstrating the impossibility of the contrary, that is, unless logic is presupposed then predication itself becomes impossible. Indeed the very statement “the laws of logic do not hold true,” is dependent upon the laws of logic holding true! Thus, to argue transcendently is, in a way, to argue circularly; however, it is not fallaciously so. It is in fact the most powerful form of argument of all, since it not only shows that the conclusion happens to be true, but that it is true *necessarily*; that is, it *cannot not* be true.

### ***Part Three – Van Til’s Transcendental argument for the existence of God***

Here I will outline the basic form that the presuppositionalist argument will take in a confrontation with a non-believer. At the outset it is important to make clear that this is not going to be in the form of traditional arguments for the existence of God. The Transcendental argument is not a single tidy package that one may quickly grasp, so that he is then able to, in encountering a non-believer, recite a few premises and a conclusion and be done with his apologetic responsibilities. It is much bigger than that, both in the multiplicity of forms that it may take in any given apologetic encounter, as well as in the ultimate conclusion that is its aim. Because the presuppositionalist's claim

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<sup>30</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (p. 117-118, 396).

is that nothing is independent of God, that indeed meaning and rationality themselves are dependent on the truth of Christianity; then anything, any fact, law, belief, claim etc... may properly serve as a springboard from which the transcendental argument may be broached. This is a very powerful aspect of the presuppositional method, since whatever topic the non-believer wants to discuss or finds particularly salient, the question may always be asked, "what is necessary for that belief you hold to be meaningful?" For this reason, the actual application of this apologetic method, how one goes about implementing it, can look different in every encounter. The second reason why the transcendental method of proving Christianity is so massive and not easily and tidily summarized is because of the conclusion that it aims to establish. The presuppositionalist is not attempting to demonstrate to the non-believer that there must be "something out there that is bigger than us." The transcendental argument is not an attempt to establish merely the existence of an "uncaused cause" or an "unmoved mover." Rather, the goal (indeed the only acceptable goal) is the establishing of the existence of God as revealed in Scripture, and that Scripture is His absolute, inspired, inerrant and authoritative revelation. Thus the transcendental argument has as its goal to prove the system of Christianity as a whole, and not merely one doctrine at a time. This entails that the transcendental argument, when laid out in full, must be comprehensive in nature. And it is in virtue of these two factors that in describing the transcendental argument, we must do so in basic structure and generalities, and not in specifics.

The transcendental argument can be explained as being comprised of two-steps, where either step may precede the other. First, is to demonstrate to the non-believer that his worldview, along with all other non-Christian worldviews, reduce to absurdity and self-contradiction, and secondly to establish the truth of Christianity by demonstrating the necessity of presupposing the Christian worldview as the precondition for all intelligibility.

The first step we will discuss is the internal critique of the opposing worldview. By assuming for the sake of argument that the opposing worldview is correct, the apologist then does a *reductio ad absurdum* (literally, reduction to absurdity) on said worldview. Because Christianity is necessary to make any sense of the world, all non-Christian worldviews are necessarily self-contradictory and thus can always be reduced to absurdity. It is in this way that the non-believer is shown that on his own worldview,

it is impossible to account for reason, science, morality etc. Though it is not only that non-Christian thought, in whatever form it may take, fails to make sense of the world, but even that it is impossible for any non-Christian worldview to be true:

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties in the debate...The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's 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's sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible.<sup>31</sup>

The second step is to then demonstrate the truth of Christianity by demonstrating the necessity of presupposing the Christian worldview as the precondition for all intelligibility. For example, if the apologist has already shown how the non-believer's worldview fails to account for science, he may then show how on the Christian worldview science is meaningful and consistent. It is also important to establish that it is not just the worldview of the person with whom you are talking that fails to account for meaning in the world, but that all worldviews that reject the authority of Scripture as the revelation of the God revealed therein ultimately fail for that same reason. Thus, we are not proving that all non-Christian thought happens to be wrong and that Christianity happens to be true; rather we are proving that all non-Christian thought is wrong necessarily and that *Christianity is necessary for it to be possible to say of anything at all that it is true* (or false, for that matter!). Upon demonstration of the rationality of Christianity and the utter failure of any anti-Christian systems of thought, there are a few consequences that immediately follow.

The non-believer, if he held to his worldview with complete consistency, would live in utter meaninglessness and confusion, unable to make sense of anything within himself or the world around him. Thus the ability of the non-believer to function in this world, his use and reliance upon logic, reason, science and morality (none of which he

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<sup>31</sup> Van Til, *Defense of the Faith* (p. 100-101).

has any intellectual right to hold to, since on his worldview all of these are completely destroyed and unviable) demonstrates that he does not in fact hold consistently to his beliefs. Rather, he lives as though the world makes sense as it can only make sense on Christian presuppositions. The non-believer attests to the truth of Christianity by affirming that which only Christianity provides. For example, a naturalistic scientist, after being shown that his worldview makes science impossible, may respond that "I may not be able to account for science, but I can still go to my lab and do science! So science must be possible even if I don't believe in God!" But this is precisely the power and beauty of arguing by presupposition. Romans 1 says that all men know God, but they suppress the truth in unrighteousness. The unbelieving scientist with his words can deny that God exists; yet, he is unable (being himself made in the image of God), to live in any way other than that which attests to the God of Scripture. Thus the non-believer is presupposing the truth of the Christian worldview in order to argue against it, which is to say that to utter the phrase 'God does not exist' is to presuppose God's existence. To illustrate this point, Van Til told a story of seeing a little girl sitting on her father's lap, slapping him in the face. It was only by virtue of her father supporting her and holding her safely on his lap that she had the ability to reach up and defiantly slap him.<sup>32</sup> In the same way, the non-believer is depending on God for *literally everything*, only to deny the existence of the sure foundation upon which he stands and defy the authority by which his world exists and is meaningful.

Upon being shown how his own worldview destroys itself and that Christianity alone can account for the meaning of anything; the non-believer is then left with the choice either to recognize the truth of Christianity, repent and submit to the lordship of Christ, or else he must reject God *and rationality*. Thereby declaring implicitly his motive for doing so is not a matter of reasonable objection to the faith, but is merely the expression of his hatred of God and refusal to believe, even if that means he must embrace meaninglessness and irrationality as a consequence.

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<sup>32</sup> Van Til. *Essays on Christian Education* (p. 89).

## *Part Four – Van Til’s critique of the Traditional apologetic method.*

Within the realm of apologetics there seems to be an understanding that apologetic discourse with an unbeliever must be conducted in a spirit of neutrality. That is, the apologist is to temporarily suspend his beliefs about God and the Bible, in order that he and the non-Christian may together consider facts and evidences by the use of commonly held and agreed upon methods of interpretation and reasoning, in hopes that a consideration of the “facts” will be compelling enough for the non-Christian to think twice about the plausibility of Christianity and hopefully even be convinced of Christianity’s claims, such that he repents and is converted. The Christian must take on this neutral position in his thought and reasoning, for since he is attempting to convince the unbeliever of the truth of Christianity, he cannot operate in his reasoning and argumentation as though Christianity were true, or else he would be guilty of begging the question; that is, he would be assuming the very thing that he is trying to prove. Van Til rejects the very idea of neutrality as being completely contrary to Christianity (read: reality), and thus there is no place for it in a Christian’s reasoning. I have addressed already whether this commits Van Til to fallaciously arguing in a circle and will not revisit that here. Instead we will consider two of many problems that Van Til and others have raised against the traditional method of defending the Faith. Generally, by the “traditional method” I am referring to those who would commend either the classical apologetic arguments for the existence of God,<sup>33</sup> or the evidential approach that appeals to the common understanding of the natural world as well as to history, in order to make the claims of Christianity seem more than likely to be true.

### *Objection 1*

Van Til claims that to argue using the traditional method is to grant to the non-Christian that he is neutral and autonomous, since whatever conclusion he is to arrive at (be it in favor of the existence of God or not), he will reach on the basis of his own (presumed) autonomy. The problem with this of course, is that no man is truly

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<sup>33</sup> The Cosmological argument, the Teleological argument, the Ontological Argument and the argument from morality; All of which, historically, have had several different formulations.

autonomous, but is rather dependent upon and sustained by God for everything.<sup>34</sup> Nor is any man neutral in his thinking but rather is naturally opposed to God in every way.<sup>35</sup> Thus the traditional apologist communicates to the non-Christian that he is able to and ought rightly to judge for himself what is true and right. But the traditional apologist must contradict himself, since he invites the non-Christian to presuppose that the Biblical accounts of the nature of God and man are false (and instead to believe that if God exists he only does so contingently, and that sinful man is actually morally neutral in his reasoning), and yet desires the non-Christian to finally conclude that they are actually true.

The traditional method has explicitly built into it the right and ability of the natural man, apart from the work of the Spirit of God, to be the judge of the claims of the authoritative Word of God. It is man who, by means of his self-established intellectual tools, puts his "stamp of approval" on the Word of God and then, only after that grand act, does he listen to it. God's Word must first pass man's tests of good and evil, truth and falsity. But once you tell a non-Christian this, why should he be worried by anything else that you say. You have already told him he is quite all right just the way he is! Then the Scripture is not correct when it talks of "darkened minds," "willful ignorance," "dead men," and "blind people"! With this method the correctness of the natural man's problematics is endorsed. That is all he needs to reject the Christian faith.<sup>36</sup>

Later in the same work Van Til goes on to say:

To look for a point of contact with the unbeliever in the unbeliever's notions of himself and his world is to encourage him in his wicked rebellion and to establish him in his self-frustration. We have already seen that the natural man is under the self-imposed delusion that he is "free," i.e., independent of the control and counsel of God, and that the "facts" about him are also "free" in this way. He may pretend to be "open-minded" and ready to consider whether God exists. But in being so "neutral" he commits the same sin as Adam and Eve.<sup>37</sup>

## ***Objection 2***

Van Til would also claim that the traditional apologetic method can never establish God and the Bible as ultimately authoritative. By attempting to argue for

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<sup>34</sup> John 15.5, 2 Corinthians 3.5

<sup>35</sup> Rom 8.7-8, Jeremiah 13.23, 2 Corinthians 4.4

<sup>36</sup> Van Til. *My Credo*.

<sup>37</sup> Van Til. *My Credo*.

Christianity by appealing to the non-believer's understanding of the natural world or his understanding of history, the Christian is logically (good intentions notwithstanding) subordinating the authority of God and His Word to whatever authority by which he is attempting to establish them. For example, suppose a Christian and a non-Christian are in a discussion and the Christian is attempting to persuade the non-believer to accept the truth and authority of the claims of the Bible. And he does so by appealing to history (and thus also to the *authority* of history). And suppose he does a bang-up job, such that the non-Christian is left scratching his head thinking "I've never heard Christianity presented in such a compelling way, I accept the authority of history and this Christian has just made a case for Christianity by appealing to an authority that I accept." If the non-Christian is finally convinced by historical evidences and argumentation, and accepts the authority of Scriptures *on the basis of* its historical reliability, then the Scriptures cannot rightfully claim ultimate authority over that person, in actuality the traditional apologist in arguing this way has given the unbeliever every right to reject the ultimate authority of Scripture.

A huge amount of clarification may be necessary at this point. Salvation and conversion are not of well-worded arguments,<sup>38</sup> or of the charming personality of the apologist. Salvation belongs to the LORD.<sup>39</sup> And He may use any means he wishes in order to accomplish His purposes and we do not tie His hands in any way by our incomplete ways of commending the faith to others. If the Lord deems to use you or me, He is using imperfect means. Van Til would not say that people cannot be (or are not) converted by means of a conversation that appeals to the authority of scientific or historical evidences and Christianity's consistency with them. Nor is Van Til in any way attempting to say that we should use another method because it will get better "results" (read: conversions). Rather, what Van Til is saying by way of critique is that the traditional method is inconsistent in that it starts with an appeal to neutral shared authority, but wants to end with the ultimate authority of God and His revealed Word. Thus it must resort to a "bait and switch" of some kind.

If we remain consistent in an appeal for Christianity on the authority of history, then whenever there is new "historical findings" such as the supposed tomb and bones of Jesus, the new convert *ought* to weigh this evidence to see whether Christianity is still

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<sup>38</sup> 1 Corinthians 2.1-5

<sup>39</sup> Jonah 2.9

a viable viewpoint to accept. The fact of the matter is however, that upon conversion a person submits himself to the Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Word of God. Thus in order for the traditional method to be successful it must be inconsistent. It makes conversion a leap of faith, similar to that of Wittgenstein's ladder: we climb a ladder composed of man's own autonomous reason, only to get to the top to realize our support is insufficient as such. Thus we must kick the ladder out from under ourselves. "Anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb up beyond them (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up by it)."<sup>40</sup> Should we presume to "improve" upon the message in order to make it easier to accept? Or should we not rather pursue a method of apologetics that recognizes the authority and lordship of Jesus Christ from the beginning? Should we not, in our apologetics, endeavor to represent God as He has already represented Himself?

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<sup>40</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

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