

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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Cornelius Van Til

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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.