

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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Why I Am Not a Van Tilian

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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).