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Taking Every Thought Captive

Reformed apologetics is an approach to defending the faith that differs significantly from traditional apologetics. Nevertheless, Reformed apologists do seek to provide a reasoned defense of the gospel. The apostle Paul described his ministry as “destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and . . . taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). Reformed apologists commonly understand their ministry as continuing Paul’s mandate. They staunchly oppose the idea of neutrality in any area of thought, insisting that Jesus Christ is Lord over science, philosophy, theology, and apologetics. The title of John Frame’s book *Apologetics to the Glory of God* nicely captures the spirit of Reformed apologetics.

The distinctive theological and philosophical assumptions of Reformed apologetics lead its advocates to equally distinctive approaches to such issues as the existence of God and the problem of evil. In general, Reformed apologetics, especially as articulated by such conservative apologists as Gordon Clark and Cornelius Van Til, may be fairly characterized as *offensive*. The term is susceptible of two senses here, and actually both apply. Objectively, Reformed apologetics seeks to take the initiative and show that unbelieving thought is irrational, not merely that faith is plausible or reasonable. In this sense “offensive” contrasts with a “defensive” approach to apologetics. Van Til was not shy about using martial metaphors to express this

approach (as Paul also did in speaking of “taking every thought captive”). For example, Van Til could write:

Apologetics, like systematics, is valuable to the precise extent that it presses the truth upon the attention of the natural man. The natural man must be blasted out of his hideouts, his caves, his lurking places. Neither Roman Catholic nor Arminian methodologies have the flame-throwers with which to reach him. In the all-out war between the Christian and the natural man as he appears in modern garb it is only the atomic energy of a truly Reformed methodology that will explode the last *Festung* [fortress] to which the Roman Catholic and the Arminian always permit him to retreat and to dwell in safety.¹

Subjectively, Reformed apologists warn that the gospel will be personally offensive to non-Christians. Apart from the enlightenment of regeneration, unbelievers take offense at the message that they are spiritually dead, at enmity with a holy God, helpless to redeem themselves, and therefore utterly dependent on the grace of God to save them through faith in Jesus Christ. Reformed apologists warn that an apologetic that fails to make the offense of the gospel clear is neither faithful nor effective. This does not mean that Reformed apologists think it is appropriate to speak to non-Christians in a harsh manner. Van Til expressed the distinction with the Latin saying *suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*, “gentle in how, strong in what” we say.

Scripture as Foundation

Clark and Van Til both insisted on the necessity of presupposing the divine inspiration and absolute truth of Scripture, not only in theology but also in apologetics. For them the divine

authority of Scripture is the beginning, not the conclusion, of the apologetic case for Christianity. As with other aspects of their thought, Clark and Van Til worked out this presuppositional view of biblical authority in somewhat differing ways.

Clark's view is disarmingly simple on one level, but it should not be dismissed as simplistic. Every system of thought, he contends, must rest on one or more axioms, fixed assumptions that need not and cannot be demonstrated, and from which all other elements of the system are derived. Since this is unavoidable, there can be no objection in principle to Christianity being based on such an axiom. Clark puts forward as the proper axiomatic foundation of Christianity the proposition that the Bible is God's word. "Our axiom shall be that God has spoken. More completely, God has spoken in the Bible. More precisely, what the Bible says, God has spoken."²

There is a very close relation between Scripture, God, and logic in Clark's axiom, which is brought out very clearly in a postscript to his textbook on logic. In one of his most controversial views, Clark suggests that the Greek word *logos* in John 1:1, usually rendered "Word," can also be rendered "Logic."³ (Earlier in the same book [page x] he suggests the rendering "Wisdom.") The whole verse may then be properly translated, "In the beginning was Logic, and Logic was with God, and Logic was God." Clark points out that the word *logos* carried an intellectualist connotation in much of its usage and argues that his rendering no more depersonalizes the preincarnate Christ than does "the Word." Clark wishes to make two points with this surprising interpretation of John 1:1. First, irrationality has no place in Christianity. If Logic is God, then we ought to think logically about God and not retreat into mysticism. Second, though, logic is not an independent standard of truth to which God himself must conform, but is

rather an expression of the eternal nature of God. “The law of contradiction is not to be taken as an axiom prior to or independent of God. The law is God thinking” (121).

Clark then turns to the relation of God to Scripture. He denies that the Bible should be thought of essentially “as a material book, with paper contents, and a leather binding.” Rather, “the Bible expresses the mind of God. Conceptually it is the mind of God, or, more accurately, a part of God’s mind. . . . The Bible then is the mind or thought of God” (124). Clark is not denying that the material books bearing the title “the Bible” exist. He is arguing that these many printed volumes are representations of the one body of truth communicated from the mind of God to us. That body of truth is the singular reality that is meant when we speak of *the Bible*.

Since Logic is of the essence of God, presumably “if God has spoken, he has spoken logically” (125). Scripture, then, is eminently logical and contains numerous instances of various kinds of logical arguments.

The fact that Scripture is logical and expresses the mind of God makes it the proper axiom, according to Clark. He explains why neither logic nor God per se should be made the axiom. The law of contradiction (which Clark regards as the base principle of logic) is essential for knowledge, but by itself “is not sufficient to produce knowledge” (126). Clark recognizes that a contentless logic is meaningless; it is order without anything to be placed in order. He acknowledges that it may seem more reasonable to make God the axiom of one’s system, but to speak of “God” without specifying which God is also useless. He cites the pantheistic system of Spinoza, who made God his axiom—but defined God as Nature. “Hence the important thing is not to presuppose God, but to define the mind of the God presupposed. Therefore the Scripture is offered here as the axiom” (127).

As we have seen, Van Til's apologetic was a transcendental presuppositionalism, whereas Clark's was a deductive presuppositionalism. Van Til does not seek to build a system of thought deductively from an initial axiom or axioms. For him the presupposition of all thought is not a logical axiom but a transcendent reality that makes all thought possible, meaningful, and intelligible. This presupposition is not Scripture per se, nor is it God as an abstract concept (generic theism); rather, it is the God who speaks in Scripture (*Christian* theism). The closeness with which God and Scripture are associated allows Van Til to speak sometimes of God, sometimes of Scripture, and sometimes of Christian theism as the presupposition of all intelligibility. In fact, he asserts that it makes very little difference which one of these we treat as our "starting point."

We know nothing but such facts as are what the book, the authoritative revelation of God, says they are. And we challenge unbelievers by saying that unless the facts are what the Bible says they are, they have no meaning at all.⁴

Christian theism must be presented as that light in terms of which any proposition about any fact receives meaning. Without the presupposition of the truth of Christian theism no fact can be distinguished from any other fact. . . . It is the actual existence of the God of Christian theism and the infallible authority of the Scripture which speaks to sinners of this God that must be taken as the presupposition of the intelligibility of any fact in the world.⁵

So also it makes very little difference whether we begin with the notion of an absolute God or with the notion of an absolute Bible. The one is derived from the other. They are together involved in the Christian view of life. . . . The Bible must be true because it

alone speaks of an absolute God. And equally true is it that we believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one.⁶

In Van Til's view, the Bible is God's authoritative revelation of the truth that must be the truth if we are even to make sense of speaking of the Bible or anything else as true or not. Given this view of the Bible, it follows that the Bible cannot be rationally subjected to any tests or criteria of reason to determine or validate its claim to authority.

In the first place it must be affirmed that a Protestant accepts Scripture to be that which Scripture itself says it is on its own authority. Scripture presents itself as being the only light in terms of which the truth about facts and their relations can be discovered. . . . So we cannot subject the authoritative pronouncements of Scripture about reality to the scrutiny of reason because it is reason itself that learns of its proper function from Scripture.⁷

In a section of his book *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga discusses "Proper Basicity and the Role of Scripture."⁸ Christian belief, he argues, is properly basic and immediate. "It doesn't proceed by way of an argument from, say, the reliability of Scripture or of the church.... Instead, Scripture (through the work of the Holy Spirit) carries its own evidence with it; as Calvin says, it is 'self-authenticating'" (259). After quoting Calvin on this point, Plantinga elaborates further: it is not that the Holy Spirit convinces us that the Bible is true, and we then infer that if something is taught in the Bible it must be true. (Note here how different Plantinga's view is from Clark's, for whom the truth of the Bible is the axiom from which all Christian beliefs are to be inferred.) Rather, as we read or hear what Scripture says, the Holy Spirit convinces us that what we have just read or heard (the teaching or report given in

Scripture) is true (260). Plantinga comments further that Scripture is not ‘self-authenticating’ by way of its truth-claims being a priori self-evident or by way of its providing evidence or proof of its accuracy (260-61). They are, however, ‘self-evident’ in an “extended sense,” in that they are properly basic, like memory beliefs, neither a priori self-evident nor accepted a posteriori on the basis of other evidences or reasons, but warranted immediately in themselves.

Scripture is self-authenticating in the sense that for belief in the great things of the gospel to be justified, rational, and warranted, no historical evidence and argument for the teaching in question, or for the veracity or reliability or divine character of Scripture (or the part of Scripture in which it is taught) are necessary. (262)

Plantinga’s view of Scripture has affinities with both Reformed apologetics and (as we shall see later) fideism. Like Clark, Van Til, and other conservative Reformed apologists, Plantinga affirms that Scripture is self-authenticating and that Christian faith comes through reading or hearing the Scripture as God’s self-authenticating truth. Like fideists, on the other hand, Plantinga holds that the work of the Holy Spirit authenticates the concrete, central truths of Scripture, not necessarily the truth of every part of Scripture. According to Plantinga’s model, “the central truths of the gospel are self-authenticating in this way; the same does not (necessarily) go for the rest of what the Bible teaches” (261 n. 38).

Antithesis between Christian and Non-Christian Religion

The exclusive truth claims of Christianity are widely rejected today in favor of religious pluralism—the belief that the different religions of the world all are valid paths and none of them is to be regarded as true to the exclusion of the others. Classical apologists argue that this view is

false because the different world religions are logically incompatible. Evidentialists argue it is false because non-Christian religions are not supported by the facts of history and science, while Christianity enjoys strong factual support.

Reformed apologists characteristically find these approaches inadequate. A typical Van Tilian critique would run along the following lines. The classical approach assumes that Christians and non-Christians share the same understanding of what is logically possible, and the evidentialist approach assumes that they share the same understanding of what kinds of facts are even possible, as well as what kinds are religiously significant. Reformed apologists favor a more head-on approach, which we may summarize in two points. First, it is characteristic of Reformed apologetics to contend that religious pluralism is self-defeating; any criticism of religious exclusivism actually presupposes its truth. (In practice classical and evidentialist apologists can and sometimes do make the same point.) Second, at bottom there are really only two kinds of religion: the one that makes God ultimate (Christianity), and the ones that do not (all the other religions).

We begin with the first point, one made across the spectrum of the Reformed approach to apologetics (and by some other apologists as well). For a recent notable statement of the view that religious pluralism is self-defeating, we refer to an article by Alvin Plantinga.⁹ He observes that as a Christian he finds himself holding to religious views that he realizes are not held by everyone. These beliefs may be distilled to two:

- (1) The world was created by God, an almighty, all-knowing, and perfectly good personal being (one that holds beliefs; has aims, plans, and intentions; and can act to accomplish these aims)

(2) Human beings require salvation, and God has provided a unique way of salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son.

(192)

As Plantinga observes, people disagree with his position in three ways. Some affirm (1) but not (2); these are non-Christian theists such as Jews and Muslims. Some affirm neither (1) nor (2) but agree that there is a transcendent reality to which human beings need to be properly related; these are members of nontheistic religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Finally, some affirm neither (1) nor (2) and also believe in no transcendent reality; these are naturalists or atheists (192).

In contrast to these three avowed non-Christian views, the affirmation of both (1) and (2) as true implies “that any propositions, including other religious beliefs, that are incompatible with those tenets are false.” This position is what Plantinga calls **exclusivism** (194), and its denial is termed **pluralism**.

Exclusivism as used here refers to the claim that only the Christian religion is *true*. In a narrower sense the term also refers to the claim that only the Christian religion is *salvific*, that is, that only those who believe in Christ will be saved. Exclusivism in the narrow sense presupposes exclusivism in the broader sense. On the other hand, it is possible to hold that Christianity is exclusively true while denying that it is exclusively salvific.

Plantinga identifies two basic kinds of objections to exclusivism, moral and epistemic. The moral objections complain that exclusivism is arrogant, imperialistic, oppressive, and the like, while epistemic objections characterize it as irrational or unjustified. Plantinga observes that these objections do not purport to question the truth of (1) or (2); “they are instead directed to the *propriety* or *rightness* of exclusivism” (195).

In the face of the moral objections, Plantinga further qualifies his definition of exclusivism. Someone who sincerely thought there were arguments that would convince most or all honest people of the truth of his position would presumably not be arrogant to think so. Plantinga proposes to exclude such persons from the category of exclusivists. An exclusivist thus affirms both (1) and (2), but also affirms (3) that they know of no arguments that would necessarily convince most or all other people of the truth of (1) and (2). Plantinga's answer to the charge that exclusivists, thus defined, must be arrogant is to show that the accusation would have to apply equally to the critic of exclusivism. "These charges of arrogance are a philosophical tar baby: get close enough to them to use them against the exclusivist, and you are likely to find them stuck fast to yourself" (197-198). He shows this by considering the alternatives. The person who denies the truth of both Christianity and other religions actually disagrees with or rejects the religious views of even more people than the person who affirms the truth of Christianity and denies the truth of other religions (198). The person who professes to abstain from either believing or rejecting the Christian religion ("the abstemious pluralist") implicitly disagrees with both those who believe and those who avowedly reject Christianity (198-199).

Plantinga considers several forms of epistemic objections to exclusivism. The charge that exclusivism is unjustified really turns on whether beliefs (1) and (2) are true, since, if they are, it follows quite simply that denials of (1) and (2) are false (202-203). But Plantinga goes the extra mile and asks whether exclusivism is justified even if we are aware of other religious beliefs that seem to be as reasonable for their adherents to believe as Christianity is for us (204-205). His answer is that the Christian is still justified in affirming an exclusivist position. In affirming Christianity "she must still think that there is an important difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has *made a mistake*, or *has a blind spot*, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or

hasn't received some grace she has, or is in some way epistemically less fortunate" (205).

Plantinga admits that, in principle, he could be wrong, but points out that he cannot avoid that risk by withholding all belief, since it might be a mistake to view all religions as on a par.

"Again, there is no safe haven here, no way to avoid risk" (205).

Plantinga's handling of the popular accident-of-birth argument is particularly interesting. According to this argument, the exclusivist is unwarranted in thinking that his religious beliefs are true and alternative beliefs false, because most people's religious beliefs (including the exclusivist's) are a function of where they were born and who their parents were. Plantinga responds that "this argument is another philosophical tar baby" that will apply equally to the pluralist (211). "Pluralism isn't and hasn't been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldn't have been a pluralist" (212). Plantinga concludes that we can apparently infer nothing at all about whether a religious belief is warranted from the so-called accident of birth.

Van Til also considers the accident-of-birth argument in his apologetic tract *Why I Believe in God*. He contends that such an argument results in a stalemate and cannot then be used to determine what is true. He contrasts his upbringing in a devout Calvinist home with the imagined upbringing of his fictional non-Christian listener in a pluralistic home:

Shall we say then that in my early life I was conditioned to believe in God, while you were left free to develop your own judgment as you pleased? But that will hardly do. You know as well as I that every child is conditioned by its environment. You were as thoroughly conditioned *not* to believe in God as I was to believe in God. So let us not call each other names. If you want to say that belief was poured down *my* throat, I shall retort

by saying that unbelief was poured down *your* throat. That will get us set for our argument.¹⁰

Having shown that neutrality on religious questions is not an option, conservative Reformed apologists such as Van Til and Clark go on to show why Christianity must be regarded as the true religion. Clark's strategy in *A Christian View of Men and Things* is to argue that only on the grounds of Christian theism can one avoid skepticism. The first part of his argument focuses on showing that naturalism "leads to inconsistency, despair, or suicide," and that only "theistic presuppositions" can provide a basis for history, politics, and ethics. But he recognizes that this argument, if not fully developed, may seem to leave the door open to other forms of theism.

But the fact that naturalism has proved intolerable does not of itself imply that the particular Christian presuppositions underlying the whole of the present volume are the only principles capable of supporting a satisfactory worldview. If theism is indeed necessary to the intelligibility of history, possibly Mohammedan theism or some other form would function as well as or even better than Christian theism. There has not been much argument so far to rule out such a possibility.¹¹

Clark is not here conceding that Islam might conceivably constitute a workable, or even superior, form of theism compared to Christianity.¹² Rather, he is speaking pedagogically about the limitations of what he has made clear in the book up to this point. He goes on to outline a basic strategy for responding to the challenge of Islam and other non-Christian forms of theism: "Apparently the best general procedure for one who wishes to recommend Christian theism is to show that other forms of theism are inconsistent mixtures. If some of their propositions should

be carried to their logical conclusions, naturalism and eventually skepticism would result; whereas if justice is to be done to possible interpretations of other of their assertions, Christianity would have to be assumed.”¹³

Apologists following Van Til’s method insist on what they see as an even more radical response to the challenge of other religions, both theistic and nontheistic. Bahnsen sets up the parameters as follows:

In dealing with the advocates of other religions, the Christian apologist should use the presuppositional method in the same way that he would use it with atheists and materialists. That is, he makes an internal examination of the worldview that is offered by whatever religious devotee he is having the dialogue with. The fact that the opposing religionist speaks formally of “God” (or “gods”) is not a difficulty here, for he must define his specific concept of deity. . . . The use of religious vocabulary does not change the applicability of the indirect method of disproving non-Christian presuppositions.¹⁴

The basic approach here is to show that there is an antithesis between Christianity and all non-Christian religions, fundamental to which is that Christianity alone presents us with an absolute and personal God. John Frame has pointed out that the conception of an absolute personal God is virtually unique to Christianity. Most world religions throughout history have been either pantheistic or polytheistic. “Pantheism has an absolute, but not a personal absolute. Polytheism has personal gods, but none of these is absolute.”¹⁵ Insofar as Judaism and Islam adhere to the concept of God as absolute personality, they show indebtedness to the biblical revelation. Frame also points out that non-Christian religions tend to obscure or deny the biblical conception of God as both transcendent and immanent (concepts somewhat parallel to the concepts of God as absolute and personal). Only if God is understood as both transcendent and

immanent (in the orthodox sense of those terms) is the Creator properly distinguished from the creature. “And non-Christians of all persuasions radically deny the biblical Creator-creature distinction.”¹⁶ Atheists deny it outright, pantheists dissolve it, and liberals redefine it.

Bahnsen’s analysis complements Frame’s. He argues that most of the world’s religions “cannot even offer epistemological competition to the Christian worldview.” They teach “that there is no god, or no personal God, or no god who is omniscient, sovereign, etc.”—that is, no god who is absolute, to use Frame’s term. Lacking the conception of a personal, sovereign God who is all-knowing and can reveal truth to us, these religions can have no “epistemological authority.” They are simply the products of human opinion.¹⁷

World religions and cults that confess “a personal deity and a verbal revelation” may seem to offer Christianity some competition, but they “are usually poor imitations of Christianity (using ‘borrowed capital’) or Christian heresies (departing from biblical teaching in a crucial way). Ordinarily, the best tactic is to reason with the advocates of these groups from Scripture, refuting their errors from the Scripture itself.”¹⁸ In the process some extrabiblical authority will typically be revealed. As for Islam, Bahnsen argues that “it can be critiqued internally on its own presuppositions.” Thus the Qur’an both affirms the words of the Bible and contradicts the Bible. It teaches the utter impossibility of using language to speak about Allah but then uses language to speak about Allah. It teaches that God is holy but that God accepts worshipers whose sins have not been atoned.¹⁹

In sum, Reformed apologists answer the challenge of religious pluralism in two ways. First, they explain that there is nothing arrogant or unreasonable about believing that one’s religious beliefs are true and therefore that other beliefs are false. Indeed, it is unreasonable to say anything else. Second, particularly conservatives such as Clark and Van Til argue that only

Christian theism presents a worldview or a transcendent point of reference in terms of which knowledge and ethics are possible or intelligible. On that basis, they conclude that non-Christian religions, though there is much good in them, are basically false.

Belief in God as Basic

Apologetics in the modern period has been dominated by the concern to provide reasons, whether in the form of proof or evidence, for belief in the existence of God. Increasingly in modern philosophy the assumption became more and more prevalent that the burden of proof was on the theist to show good reasons for believing in God, not on the nontheist to show good reasons for disbelieving in God. This assumption reached its classic formulation in Antony Flew's often discussed article "The Presumption of Atheism."²⁰ The Reformed apologist seeks to end this trend, and even to turn the tables around. Greg Bahnsen offers a particularly forceful rebuttal to the atheist presumption:

The issue of the burden of proof is often misconstrued. If we are arguing over something whose existence or nonexistence has no bearing on the intelligibility of our experience and reasoning (say, unicorns), then understandably the burden of proof rests on those who affirm its existence; without evidence, such things should be dismissed as figments of their imagination. But the existence of God is not on this order. God's existence would have tremendous bearing on the possibility of man knowing anything at all, having self-conscious intelligence, properly interpreting his experiences, or making his reasoning intelligible—even making sense out of what we call "imagination." In this special case, the burden of proof in the argument between a theist and an antitheist would shift to the

person denying God's existence, since the possibility and intelligibility of that very debate is directly affected by the position taken.²¹

One important Reformed apologist who focuses on removing the burden of proof from the theist (though not on transferring the burden of proof to the nontheist, as Bahnsen urges) is Alvin Plantinga. His most famous contention is that the Christian (or other theist) is warranted in believing in God's existence whether or not he can offer supporting arguments or evidences for his belief. As Plantinga puts it, belief in God is properly basic. We introduced his position in chapter 12. Here we will consider this particular idea in more depth, since it is often misunderstood. In what follows, we will be summarizing many of the key points in Plantinga's paper "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*.²²

According to Plantinga, a belief is **basic** if a person holds it without basing it on some other belief, that is, if it is not inferred from other beliefs. A belief is **properly basic** if the person holding it is in some significant way warranted in doing so. Several important implications of Plantinga's notion of basicity need to be understood.

First, a belief may be basic for a person at one time but not at another. For example, a person who believes that a man committed a murder on the basis of a detective's investigative report might come to hold that belief as basic after viewing a tape of the incident. Likewise, a person who believes in God on the basis of rational arguments for God's existence might later come to hold that belief as basic after having a religious experience (as happened to Plantinga).

Second, a belief may be properly basic for one person but not for another. For example, a person who witnessed a murder may hold as a basic belief that the defendant committed the murder (simply because he saw it happen), while a person on the jury who agreed would not be able to hold that belief as basic. Likewise, one person might believe that Jesus rose from the

dead based on the testimony of the apostles in the New Testament, while the apostles themselves held that belief as basic because they saw and touched the risen Jesus.

Third, the fact that a belief is basic for someone does not mean it is *groundless*. For example, a person's belief that he sees a tree is basic because it is not inferred from other beliefs; but it is not groundless, because it is grounded in his immediate experience of seeing the tree. Likewise, a person who holds as a basic belief that God exists might do so because he had a religious experience; that experience, then, would be the ground of the belief. Plantinga insists that belief in God can be properly basic for him without being groundless (78-82).

Fourth, Plantinga's claim that belief in God can be properly basic does not imply that just any belief can be basic. This is what he calls "the Great Pumpkin objection": "What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as basic?" (74). Plantinga's answer is no, because that belief would have nothing to ground it, and there is no reason why anyone should consider such a belief basic (74-78).

Fifth, the idea that a belief is properly basic is to be distinguished from two other concepts. To say that a belief is basic is not a statement about the degree of confidence or certainty with which it is held. The firmness with which a person holds a certain belief is not directly related to whether that belief is basic for him. One may hold different basic beliefs with varying degrees of firmness—for example, being more confident that $2 + 3 = 5$ than that one had eggs for breakfast this morning. One may even be more confident of some nonbasic beliefs than of some basic beliefs—for example, being more confident that $21 \times 21 = 441$, a belief held from computing it using other math facts, than that one had eggs for breakfast last Saturday (49-50).

Sixth, it is possible to abandon beliefs that one held as basic beliefs, even as properly basic. Any argument or information that removes the ground for acceptance of a belief is called a

defeater. A person who sees what looks exactly like a bowl of fruit on a table may hold as a basic belief that he sees a bowl of fruit. Later, if a trusted friend informs him that the bowl contained imitation fruit made of plastic, he will likely abandon his belief, even though it was properly basic. In this case the trusted friend's testimony constitutes a defeater. The person who holds a basic belief that God exists is not thereby closed to evidences or reasons that might be raised against it. Such evidences or reasons "constitute potential defeaters for justification in theistic belief," and they will become real defeaters for the person who is made aware of the arguments but has nothing with which to "defeat the defeaters." According to Plantinga, "Various forms of theistic apologetics serve this function (among others)" (84). Plantinga, then, is supportive of apologetics, both negative (answering defeaters) and positive (offering positive arguments).

Most Reformed apologists are critical of natural theology and the traditional theistic proofs on the basis of a simple contention: the arguments don't work. Plantinga is one of the few in this tradition who have defended some of the traditional proofs, albeit in reconstructed form. In his 1974 book *God, Freedom and Evil* he examines and sets aside the cosmological and teleological arguments as unsuccessful.²³ He then considers the ontological argument, contending that Kant's criticism of it can be overcome and the argument restated in a form that is sound yet not necessarily persuasive to everyone. "What I claim for this argument, therefore, is that it establishes, not the *truth* of theism, but its rational acceptability."²⁴

Kelly James Clark, a Reformed epistemologist who studied under Plantinga, may fairly be described as ambivalent toward arguments for God's existence. In the book *Five Views on Apologetics*,²⁵ Clark expresses admiration for William Lane Craig's defense of the *kalām* cosmological argument but cautions against claiming too much for this or other theistic

arguments. The *kalām* argument, for example, proves at most that some timeless being created the universe, but tells us little about what such a being is like. “We cannot conclude, based solely on this argument, that *theism* is true” (86). Nor is it clear that the argument can be combined with other arguments to prove theism. Clark argues that there are brilliant, rational people who look at the same evidence and draw opposite conclusions, some (like Richard Swinburne) in favor of theism while others (like J. L. Mackie) in favor of atheism. Furthermore, the success of our arguments “depends not only on the logic of the argument but on the will (including the passions, values, and emotions) of the people involved” (88). In his concluding remarks, though, Clark affirms that “theistic arguments and the like are part and parcel of apologetics.... The kind of arguments that one might offer are the very ones offered by Craig” (366, 372). Clark would offer such arguments not to show that theism or Christianity is true but to show that Christianity is not an unreasonable choice of belief:

Perhaps demonstrating that Christian belief is at least as rational as its alternatives is the best that can be expected of apologetics.... I wish Reformed epistemology and/or theistic arguments could do more than establish that belief in God is rationally permissible, but I'll settle for rational permissibility. That way I can know that my faith is not blind. I may be taking a leap in the dim, but it is not a leap in the dark (372, 373).

The more conservative wing of the Reformed apologetic tradition is troubled by this modest conclusion. An argument that concludes merely that belief in God is reasonable would seem to imply, or at least leave open the possibility, that nonbelief in God is also reasonable. Both Clark and Van Til adamantly rejected this idea. At the same time, they were more radical in their criticisms of the theistic arguments as traditionally formulated, as was Dooyeweerd.

Most of the modern philosophical criticisms of the traditional theistic proofs stem from the attacks on those proofs by David Hume and Immanuel Kant. In general, Reformed apologists endorse Hume's and Kant's criticisms, with Dooyeweerd being especially appreciative of Kant's critique of the Thomistic proofs, particularly cosmological arguments based on causality. He explains his rejection of such proofs as follows:

Take for instance the notorious antinomy of natural theology with its notion of the “unconditioned ultimate causality of God” proceeding from the impossibility of a *regressus in infinitum* in the empirical causal relations. This notion lands us in an insoluble contradiction with man's personal accountability for his actions, since it makes God the ultimate term of a series of causes and effects which must be conceived as continuous and leaving no single hiatus in the causal chain.²⁶

Thus the Thomistic cosmological argument creates an “antinomy between ‘causality’ and normative responsibility of man.”²⁷ In other words, if we say there must be a God because the universe must have a cause, we have created an irresolvable contradiction. This is because the cosmological argument commits us to a causal determinism in which all events from the beginning of time to its consummation are causally determined, including our own personal decisions. Dooyeweerd agrees with Kant that if we reject the idea that our decisions are causally determined, then we cannot endorse the causal cosmological argument. If we are to avoid the antinomy identified by Kant, we must see God not as “the ultimate cause” but as “the Origin of causality in the temporal coherence and radical unity of all its modal aspects.” In doing so we will have to acknowledge that this Origin is beyond our comprehension: “For human thought it is absolutely impossible to form a defined concept of causality in the supertemporal fulness of

meaning or in the sense of God's creative act. Impossible, because human thought is bound within the limits of the temporal coherence of meaning."²⁸

Gordon Clark's criticisms of the theistic proofs are fundamentally similar, though worded very differently. Clark's major contention is simple: "The cosmological argument for the existence of God, most fully developed by Thomas Aquinas, is a fallacy. It is not possible to begin with sensory experience and proceed by the formal laws of logic to God's existence as a conclusion."²⁹

More specifically, Clark contends that the cosmological argument is circular in form and at best warrants the conclusion that the universe had a cause along the lines of Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover," not that the universe was created by a transcendent personal Creator.³⁰ He acknowledges the skeptic David Hume as the source of these criticisms, and suggests that Christians should thank Hume for disabusing them of an embarrassingly fallacious apologetic. Clark then explains Hume's three major criticisms of the teleological or design argument (which Clark subsumes under the cosmological argument). First, the argument is fallacious if it is pressed to prove that God is more than a Master Architect; from the design of the universe it cannot be validly inferred that God is infinite in wisdom or power. Second, Clark follows Hume in arguing from the causation and design of the parts of the universe that the whole universe must have been caused or designed. In other words, he contends that the cosmological and teleological arguments commit the logical fallacy of composition (assuming that what is true of the parts will be true of the whole). Third, he agrees with Hume that the design argument, to be fair and consistent, would have to take into account the great amount of evil and chaos in the world as we know it as well as the good and order. But then it would seem that we could not validly infer an all-good and all-powerful God from the world as it now stands.³¹ Clark

concludes that the argument “is worse than useless. In fact, Christians can be pleased at its failure, for if it were valid, it would prove a conclusion inconsistent with Christianity.”³²

Although Clark eschews the cosmological argument and other attempts to prove God’s existence using reason, it seems that he does offer arguments in support of belief in God. Ronald Nash has argued that Clark in effect offers two types of justification for the affirmation of God’s existence. One is an argument from coherence in which Clark seeks to demonstrate that only the position that all things depend on God provides metaphysical consistency. In this respect, the implications of the Christian worldview can be critically compared with those of contending worldviews, and the most promising first principle can be chosen. The second form of justification stems from the nature of truth. Here Nash understands Clark to be arguing that “whatever knowledge man may derive of God from nature is possible only because man possesses an a priori knowledge of God which enables man to recognize God in nature. Just as man can know the world because he comes to the world equipped with a set of innate ideas, so man can know God in nature because there is an a priori knowledge of God present in the soul. If man sees God in nature, it is because he already knows God in his mind.”³³

A similar pattern appears in Van Til’s discussions of the question of arguments for God’s existence. He frequently speaks positively of theistic proofs, but in his view the traditional formulations of these proofs are invalid and theologically compromised. “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.”³⁴

Properly formulated, the several theistic proofs really reduce to one, namely, the indirect, presuppositional proof. Van Til says explicitly that “the true method” of proving God’s existence “must be the indirect method of reasoning by presupposition. . . . But this God cannot be proved

to exist by any other method than the indirect one of presupposition.”³⁵ Theistic proofs “have absolute probative force” if formulated on a Christian basis, assuming creation and providence, but they are “not demonstrable” in the sense that they do not proceed by “pure deduction of one conclusion after another from an original premise that is obvious. Such a notion of demonstration does not comport with the Christian system.”³⁶ “To be constructed rightly, theistic proof ought to presuppose the ontological trinity and contend that, unless we may make this presupposition, all human predication is meaningless.”³⁷ Van Til puts the matter most clearly in the following passage:

The true theistic proofs undertake to show that the ideas of existence (ontological proof), of cause (cosmological proof), and purpose (teleological proof) are meaningless unless they presuppose the existence of God. . . . 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.³⁸

Van Til favors this way of formulating the theistic proof because it avoids the specter of apologetic arguments that conclude merely that God probably exists or that it is reasonable for people to believe in God. “True reasoning about God is such as stands upon God as upon the emplacement that alone gives meaning to any sort of human argument. . . . I hold that belief in God is not merely as reasonable as other belief, or even a little or infinitely more probably true than other belief; I hold rather that unless you believe in God you can logically believe in nothing else.”³⁹

Van Til generally makes a sharp distinction between natural revelation and natural theology. Natural revelation is God's activity of making himself known to us in nature and in the *sensus divinitatis* that we have within us; natural theology is man's attempt to reason his way to a knowledge of God apart from revelation (both natural *and* biblical).⁴⁰ In one passage he seems to speak of a legitimate natural theology that, "standing upon the basis of faith and enlightened by Scripture, finds God in nature."⁴¹ But here he is clearly summarizing the teaching of Herman Bavinck, using Bavinck's own terminology.⁴² Van Til stoutly rejected seeking to formulate an argument for God's existence that was not based on divine revelation, specifically in Scripture. He held that the proper ideal was enunciated by Bavinck, even if he did not always live up to that ideal, "that theology must be built upon the Scriptures only. There must be only one principle in theology."⁴³

Ironically, though, as with Clark, some apologists have argued that Van Til really did formulate a kind of natural theology argument after all. The fact that it is a *transcendental* argument does not disqualify it as a natural theology argument as well. Gilbert Weaver summarizes Van Til's theistic argument in this way:

There are only two alternatives: either the Sovereign God of Scripture is ultimate, whose will determines whatsoever comes to pass, or Chance is ultimate. (There can be no combination of these, for says Van Til, as Hume has shown, if any degree of chance is allowed it always becomes the final and ultimate principle of explanation.) If there is no such God, then Chance is ultimate and there is no meaning in anything: thoughts, words, events or what have you follow each other in a random, meaningless order. Speech fails, and one cannot even *discuss* God, let alone which view solves the most problems, or any other subject.⁴⁴

Although Scripture is mentioned in passing here, the argument is not taken from Scripture itself and does not seem to depend on it in any clear way. It would seem to take the following form:

- A. Either an absolute sovereign God is ultimate, or Chance is ultimate.
- B. If Chance is ultimate, then there is no meaning.
- C. But there is meaning.
- D. Therefore, Chance is not ultimate.
- E. Therefore, an absolute sovereign God is ultimate.

This would seem to qualify as a natural theology argument in the usual sense of the term. Bernard Ramm labeled Van Til's theistic proof "the epistemological argument," and David Diehl similarly referred to it as Van Til's "epistemic argument."⁴⁵ Diehl admits that Van Til explicitly denies that he is doing natural theology or offering an argument based on premises to which Christians and non-Christians are both agreed. "Nevertheless, for all practical purposes Van Til does admit the laws of logic as common ground, i.e. he uses the same laws of logic that non-Christian philosophers use; and he seeks to show by these laws that non-Christian metaphysical positions cannot explain human knowledge or cosmic rationality and that only Christian theism can."⁴⁶

Diehl acknowledges that Van Til believes himself dependent on Scripture for his idea of God; Van Til did not arrive at his conception of God by rational argument. But this autobiographical fact does not alter the character of the argument Van Til offers to non-Christians as a rational ground for believing in his God. "But I contend that any appeal to our God-given human intelligence to show the evidence for God in the creation or in human experience in general is an exercise in natural theology, i.e. a theological exercise independent of

Scripture, however dependent upon Scripture one's thinking may have been prior to this in gaining a proper theistic perspective."⁴⁷

Van Til's transcendental argument can be related to the traditional theistic proofs in another way. William Lane Craig, in a response to an essay by John Frame presenting the presuppositional approach, contended that Frame's version of the argument was not transcendental at all but was, rather, "what medievals called *demonstratio quia*, proof that proceeds from consequence to ground."⁴⁸ That is, when Frame argues that God is the necessary presupposition of all meaning, he is reasoning from consequence (meaning) to ground (God), that which makes the consequence a reality. In his reply Frame suggested that all transcendental arguments can be viewed as reasoning from consequence to ground and that "many traditional types of arguments can be steps toward a transcendental conclusion." Whereas other presuppositionalists, such as Greg Bahnsen, sharply distinguish transcendental argument from all other types,⁴⁹ Frame does not.⁵⁰

The Theological Problem of Evil

In general, classical apologists have focused on the deductive problem of evil (how can there be evil if God exists?) while evidentialists have focused on its inductive counterpart (how likely is it that God exists in light of how much evil there is?). Reformed apologists have not entirely ignored these dimensions of the problem—Plantinga, in fact, has given a great deal of attention to developing a response to the inductive problem of evil—but the dimension that concerns most Reformed apologists is what we call the **theological problem of evil**. This arises specifically within a Calvinist (and to some extent Augustinian) theological context, in which a strong doctrine of divine sovereignty in human history and in salvation is taught. We may pose

the problem as follows: How can God be absolutely sovereign over all that happens (including sin) and yet not be held responsible or liable for sin? Or, to put the matter more pointedly: How can God be the author of all and not be the author of sin?

Actually, the question can be restated as a particular version of the deductive problem. (Indeed, Reformed apologists usually do state it in its deductive form, with the Calvinist notion of God as sovereign implicit.) In the usual deductive form the problem is stated as follows: How can God be all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good, and yet evil exist? The Reformed version introduces the concept of sovereign control or foreordination into the problem, as follows: How can an all-good God foreordain everything that happens, and yet evil exist?

As mentioned above, Plantinga (like Thomas Reid) advocates a version of the free-will defense as the solution to the deductive problem, and in this respect is not typical of the Reformed apologetic approach. Clark and Van Til both held frankly and adamantly to a doctrine of divine determinism, understanding it to be necessitated by the biblical doctrines of the nature of God and of salvation. Their solution to the problem of evil is essentially that of Calvin himself, and more particularly that found in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), the standard Protestant confession recognized by conservative Presbyterians and the basis of instruction at Westminster Theological Seminary, where Van Til taught for half a century. The key text from the confession is the following (3.1): “God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.”

A related portion (5.1-4) reads as follows:

I. God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

II. Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

III. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

IV. The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in his providence that it extendeth itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men, and that not by a bare permission, but such as hath joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to his own holy ends; yet so as the sinfulness thereof proceedeth only from the creature, and not from God; who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.⁵¹

Clark and Van Til pick up and emphasize several elements of the confession's teaching on God's sovereignty and the problem of evil. First, both clearly affirm that God is the cause of everything. Van Til affirms the confession's statement that God ordains everything that happens (3.1) and comments, "This is what I mean when I say that God is the ultimate cause back of all things."⁵² Clark is startlingly clear that this includes sin: "Let it be unequivocally said that this

view certainly makes God the cause of sin. God is the sole ultimate cause of everything. There is absolutely nothing independent of him.”⁵³

Second, both apologists explain God’s causal relation to the universe as the *ultimate* cause. In qualifying their use of the term *cause* they are following the confession, which distinguishes between God as the “first cause” and other, “second causes.” Likewise, Van Til notes, Calvin had distinguished between “*remote* and *proximate* causes,” teaching that God was the remote cause of everything but not the proximate cause.⁵⁴

Third, this distinction between God as the ultimate or first cause and other causes as secondary or proximate allows Clark and Van Til to deny that God is “the author of sin” (as the confession puts it, 3.1) while affirming that God is the ultimate cause of sin. That is, God is not regarded as actually committing the sin, doing the sin, or in any way culpable for the sin, because he is not the proximate or immediate, direct cause of the sin. This explanation is what John Frame calls the “indirect cause” defense against the problem of evil. It is somewhat surprising to find Frame, a conservative Presbyterian and a Van Tilian, criticizing this explanation as both unbiblical and inadequate.⁵⁵ His main objection, though, is the usual concern about this theory: it is difficult to understand how standing back in the causal chain from an act of sin, but ultimately and intentionally causing it to come about, would relieve the causal agent (in this case, God) from responsibility and even culpability for the sin.

Fourth, both Van Til and Clark can characterize their understanding of divine sovereignty as a form of determinism. Clark criticizes Calvinists who are squeamish about describing their position as such: “Some Calvinists prefer to avoid the word *determinism*. For some reason it seems to them to carry unpleasant connotations. However, the Bible speaks not only of predestination, usually with reference to eternal life, but it also speaks of the foreordination or

predetermination of evil acts. Therefore, deliberate avoidance of the word *determinism* would seem to be less than forthright.”⁵⁶

It seems reasonable to conclude that Clark embraces a strong doctrine of causal determinism in which God is the first or ultimate cause. Van Til’s position is similar but somewhat nuanced by comparison. He is surprised that J. Oliver Buswell, a Calvinist, would criticize theological determinism. Van Til does complain, though, that “in opposing determinism you [Buswell] do not carefully distinguish between fatalism and Calvinism.”⁵⁷ Elsewhere Van Til makes it clear that he rejects a physical, causal determinism. “The Calvinist notion of divine sovereignty has nothing to do with the philosopher’s notion of physical, causal determinism. I have developed at length in other places the covenantal, exhaustively personalist view of providence which is clearly part of Calvin’s thought.”⁵⁸

Clark and Van Til, then, follow both Calvin and the Westminster Confession in arguing that the theological problem of evil cannot be resolved by denying God’s absolute sovereignty as the ultimate cause of all that exists and all that happens. At the same time, though, they insist that the problem has a rational solution. Responsibility for sin devolves on the one who actually commits the sin—the person who is its immediate, direct, or proximate cause. God cannot be held culpable or liable for the sins committed by his creatures.

Behind the indirect-cause defense as employed by these Reformed apologists is the conviction that apart from God, *nothing* could have meaning. Either God or Chance is ultimate. If sin did not arise by God’s foreordained plan, then it arose by Chance. Clark and Van Til thus argue that anything less than a consistent theological determinism dethrones God as the ultimate source of meaning. Reformed apologists, and Reformed Christians in general, do not find this position troubling, but encouraging. That God is the ultimate cause of all that happens, including

sin, means that even the worst that men can do is part of a rational, morally praiseworthy purpose and plan of God. It means, to put it in biblical language, that what sinful people mean for evil, God means for good (Genesis 50:20), and that indeed God can and does work all things together for the good of those who love him (Romans 8:28).

Miracles as Revealed by God

In classical apologetics, once it is established that God exists and *could* do miracles, the historical evidence in the Bible may be fairly considered to determine whether God *did* in fact do miracles. In evidentialism, the evidence that miracles have occurred is potent and may be part of (even the primary part of) a case for the existence of the God of the Bible.

Reformed apologists object to both approaches. They do agree that one must be convinced that God exists in order to take the biblical miracles seriously, but they reject the idea of using an inductive method to determine whether the biblical miracles have occurred. As we saw in the previous chapter, they argue that biblical revelation provides the only rational context in which knowledge of history is even possible. For Clark, we need revelation to know what God has done in history for us because the empirical study of history cannot yield true knowledge. For Van Til, we need revelation in order to have the proper worldview perspective from which to study history. Both apologists agree that since miracles are special acts of God in which he reveals himself and his purposes, one cannot really accept the biblical miracles for what they are without accepting the revelation of which they are an integral part.

According to Van Til, the real, underlying reason non-Christians object to the biblical miracles is that they imply the existence of a God who is sovereign over all natural law and all fact—and therefore sovereign over *them*. The biblical miracles also presuppose that something is

wrong with the human condition (sin) that God is acting to correct in an extraordinary way (redemption). They are thus an affront to non-Christians. “We would have to interpret the idea of scientific ‘law’ as being subservient to that of the biblical account of sin and redemption controlled by the fiat of the sovereign God. This cannot be, and we will not have it!”⁵⁹

One of David Hume’s main objections to the argument from miracles was that it depends on *reports* of miracles, not on direct personal observation or experience of miracles. Hume argued that if all we have are persons reporting that they witnessed a miracle, it is always more reasonable to doubt the truthfulness or reliability of the persons reporting the alleged miracle than to believe that a miracle actually occurred. Reformed apologists typically agree that a report of a miracle must be viewed very differently from a personal experience of a miracle. For example, to evidentialist John Warwick Montgomery’s claim that we should base our apologetic on miracles because the apostles did, Bahnsen replies that “Christian apologists are not in the same position as Christ or the apostles with respect to presenting empirical evidence. Their hearers were presented with miracles, while our hearers are presented with reports of miracles. This important difference has tremendous epistemological implications for the way in which a person defends, or even can defend, the person and claims of Christ.”⁶⁰

Reformed apologists also criticize the traditional historical argument for the resurrection of Jesus, and typically offer at least two related criticisms. First, they argue that the historical argument, insofar as it seeks to prove the Resurrection without presupposing the truth of Christianity, is fallacious. For example, no matter how well preserved the biblical text is or how soon it was written after the events it reports, the skeptic is only being consistent in rejecting its reliability when it reports miracles such as Jesus’ resurrection. Bahnsen also argues that unbelievers would be inconsistent with their principles if they were not to view the resurrection

of Jesus as highly improbable. “The traditional apologist appeals to ‘probability,’ yet from his own experience the unbeliever knows how extremely improbable a resurrection is.”⁶¹

Second, Reformed apologists argue that the skeptic can always agree that Jesus may have risen from the dead but then suggest that it doesn’t prove that he is God incarnate. In one of his most famous illustrations, Van Til presented a dialogue in which Mr. Grey, a Christian using a traditional apologetic, sought to convince Mr. Black, a non-Christian, that Jesus rose from the dead. Mr. Grey’s strategy was to try to convince Mr. Black of the truth of the Resurrection as an historical fact separate from its theological significance. Here is Mr. Black’s reply: “To tell you the truth, I have accepted the resurrection as a fact now for some time. The evidence for it is overwhelming. This is a strange universe. All kinds of ‘miracles’ happen in it. The universe is ‘open.’ So why should there not be some resurrections here and there? The resurrection of Jesus would be a fine item for Ripley’s *Believe It or Not*. Why not send it in?”⁶²

Van Til offers an explanation:

For Mr. Black, history is something that floats on an infinitely extended and bottomless ocean of Chance. Therefore he can say that anything may happen. Who knows but that the death and resurrection of Jesus as the Son of God might issue from this womb of Chance? . . . Now the Evangelical does not challenge this underlying philosophy of Chance as it controls the unbeliever’s conception of history. He is so anxious to have the unbeliever accept the possibility of God’s existence and the *fact* of the resurrection of Christ that, if necessary, he will exchange his own philosophy of fact for that of the unbeliever. Anxious to be genuinely “empirical” like the unbeliever, he will throw all the facts of Christianity into the bottomless pit of Chance. Or, rather, he will throw all these

facts at the unbeliever, and the unbeliever throws them over his back into the bottomless pit of Chance.⁶³

The only way out of this apologetic nightmare, according to Van Til, is to challenge the unbeliever's philosophy of fact and to present the Resurrection, along with all other facts, as meaningful only in the context of Christian theism. "But I would not talk endlessly about facts and more facts without ever challenging the non-believer's philosophy of fact. A really fruitful historical apologetic argues that every fact is and must be such as proves the truth of the Christian theistic position."⁶⁴

Jesus: The Self-Attesting Christ of Scripture

In the 1971 volume *Jerusalem and Athens*, a collection of essays examining Van Til's philosophy and apologetic, Van Til was invited to present his own position, which he called "My Credo."⁶⁵ This essay is rightly regarded as his clearest statement of his apologetic approach. The thrust of the essay is that Christ should be viewed and honored as *self-attesting*. Thus he opens with this statement: "The self-attesting Christ of Scripture has always been my starting-point for everything I have said" (3). He explains, "Jesus asks me to do what he asked the Pharisees to do, namely, read the Scriptures in light of this testimony about himself" (4). Christ's own word about himself, his self-attestation, is the basis on which we are to believe in him.

Van Til then explains the place of Scripture in his view of Christ as self-attesting. For him the Bible is, in essence, "a letter" from Christ himself, written through helpers who "wrote what he wanted me to know" (5). As a Protestant, Van Til is convinced that the Bible, as Christ's letter to us, must also be viewed as self-attesting. The problem with Roman Catholic and non-

Reformed evangelical theologies is that to varying degrees (Catholics more, evangelicals less) they compromise this self-attesting authority of Christ speaking in Scripture. None of them “have a view of Scripture such that the Lord Christ speaks to man with absolute authority. The self-attesting Christ of Scripture is not absolutely central to these theologies. Just so, he will not be central in any apologetic form to defend them” (10).

Even Reformed theologians, Van Til found, typically defended the self-attesting Christ “with a method which denied precisely that point!” (10). He therefore sought to develop “a Christ-centered apologetic” that would focus “on the self-attesting Christ of Scripture” (10, 11), and found its basis in Calvin’s understanding of Christ as *autotheos*, “God himself” (14). This is a particularly emphatic way of designating Christ as God that eliminates any vestiges of subordinationism in the Trinity. That Christ is *autotheos* implies that Christ’s own identification of himself is self-authenticating.

If Christ is who he says he is, then all speculation is excluded, for God can swear only by himself. To find out what man is and who God is, one can only go to Scripture. Faith in the self-attesting Christ of the Scriptures is the beginning, not the conclusion of wisdom! It was, therefore, not until the fully developed trinitarian theology of Calvin, which says that Christ is authoritative because *autotheos*, that there was therewith developed a truly Christian methodology of theology and of apologetics. (15)

Given this understanding of Christ as self-attesting, Van Til resolutely rejects any method of apologetics that would seek to base the truth about Christ on reasons or proofs that could be recognized as such by the non-Christian on his own terms. “Rather the Christian offers the self-attesting Christ to the world as the only foundation upon which a man must stand in order to give any ‘reasons’ for anything at all” (18).

The first plank of Van Til’s proposal “for a consistently Christian methodology of apologetics,” then, is “that we use the same principle in apologetics that we use in theology: the self-attesting, self-explanatory Christ of Scripture” (21).

For Further Study

Clark, Gordon H. *Religion, Reason and Revelation*. Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1961; 2nd ed.

Jefferson, Md.: Trinity Foundation, 1986. Notable for Clark’s treatment of the relationship of faith and reason, his critique of the cosmological argument, and his argument for a deterministic solution to the problem of evil.

Plantinga, Alvin, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, eds. *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983. Includes Plantinga’s landmark essay “Reason and Belief in God,” in which he discusses theistic arguments, the problem of evil, and the nature of rationality.

Westminster Theological Journal 57, no. 1 (fall 1995). Special issue marking the centennial of Van Til’s birth with a number of excellent, relevant articles by Bahnsen, Frame, and other advocates of Van Til’s apologetic.

¹Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 105.

²Gordon H. Clark, *In Defense of Theology* (Milford, Mich.: Mott Media, 1984), 33.

³Clark, *Logic*, 2d ed. (Jefferson, Md.: Trinity Foundation, 1988), 120-21. References to Clark in this section are from this work.

⁴Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 191.

⁵Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 115, 118.

⁶Cornelius Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 12.

⁷Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 108.

⁸Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 258-66. Citations in the following paragraphs are taken from this book.

⁹Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith: Essays in Honor of William P. Alston*, ed. Thomas D. Senior (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995), 191-215. All references to Plantinga in this section are to this article. The article has already been reprinted at least twice: as "A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *Analytic Theist*, ed. Sennett, 187-209, and in *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*, ed. Louis Pojman (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1996).

¹⁰Cornelius Van Til, *Why I Believe in God*, in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 126.

¹¹Clark, *Christian View of Men and Things*, 231.

¹²This understanding of Clark seems implicit in Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 669-670.

¹³Clark, *Christian View of Men and Things*, 231.

¹⁴Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 524 n. 126.

¹⁵Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction*, 38.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁷Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 524 n. 126.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 525 n. 126. (This very long note begins on p. 523 and continues to p. 525.)

²⁰Antony Flew, "The Presumption of Atheism," in *God, Freedom, and Immortality* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1984), reprint of a book originally entitled *The Presumption of Atheism* (1976). Flew continued this theme in his published debate with evangelical philosopher and apologist Terry Miethe, *Does God Exist? A Believer and an Atheist Debate* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1991).

²¹Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 479 n. 28.

²²Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God," in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. Plantinga and Wolterstorff, 16-93. Parenthetical references to Plantinga in the remainder of this section are from this paper.

²³Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 77-84.

²⁴Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, 112.

²⁵*Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan; all citations in the next two paragraphs are from Kelly James Clark's contributions to this book.

²⁶Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, 2:38.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 40.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 2:40-41.

²⁹Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 35.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 35-38.

³¹*Ibid.*, 39-41.

³²*Ibid.*, 41.

³³Nash, "Gordon Clark's Theory of Knowledge," in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark: A Festschrift*, ed. Ronald H. Nash, 157.

³⁴Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 197.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 108-109.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 176.

³⁷Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 49.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 190, 192.

³⁹Van Til, *Why I Believe in God*, 139, 143.

⁴⁰Cornelius Van Til, *Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, 56; Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 301; Van Til, *Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1971), 12-13, 24; cf. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 184-86, 192-94.

⁴¹Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 44.

⁴²Cf. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 613 n. 129, where he rather tentatively makes the same point.

⁴³Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 44.

⁴⁴Gilbert B. Weaver, "Gordon Clark: Christian Apologist," in *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark*, ed. Nash, 301.

⁴⁵David Waring Diehl, "Divine Omniscience in the Thought of Charles Hartshorne and Cornelius Van Til: A Systemic Comparative Study" (Ph.D. diss., Hartford Seminary Foundation, 1978), 224-225. Diehl cites Ramm, *Types of Apologetic Systems*, 202. See also Diehl, "Van Til's Epistemic Argument: A Case of Inadvertent Natural Theology" (faculty paper, The King's College, n.d.).

⁴⁶Diehl, "Divine Omniscience," 264.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 266.

⁴⁸William Lane Craig, “A Classical Apologist’s Response,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, 233.

⁴⁹Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 496-529.

⁵⁰Frame, “A Presuppositional Apologist’s Closing Remarks,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Cowan, 359-60.

⁵¹Westminster Confession of Faith 3.1; 5.1-4, in *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3, *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds, with Translations*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff, (New York: Harper & Row, 1931; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 608, 612-13.

⁵²Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 182.

⁵³Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 238.

⁵⁴Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 182.

⁵⁵Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 165-66.

⁵⁶Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation*, 207.

⁵⁷Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 184-85.

⁵⁸Van Til, “My Credo,” 16.

⁵⁹Van Til, *Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, 5, in Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic*, 380.

⁶⁰Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 642.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 646.

⁶²Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 240.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 242.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 199.

⁶⁵Van Til, "My Credo," 3-21. All references to Van Til in this section are from this article.