

BOOK FOUR

PRESUPPOSITIONALISM IN CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS

SUMMARY OF BOOK FOUR

Addressing the world with Christian presuppositions, the advocates of this apologetic system sharply distinguish their approach from that of the fideism or subjectivism (of which they are sometimes accused) and the so-called classical or traditional apologetics of rationalists and evidentialists. They maintain that the condition of being unregenerate disables people for embracing revelation as revelation, either general or special. Carl F. H. Henry, for example, points out that merely proving there was a resurrection does not establish its theological significance for those whose world view is inimical to the biblical weltanschauung.

Several leading presuppositionalist apologists have been discussed, but Cornelius Van Til is considered to be the leading representative of this view in the twentieth century. Although maintaining there is no commonality between secular philosophy and Christian thought, Van Til uses traditional philosophical language with Christian meaning for the sake of discussion. The Christian philosophy of life, contained in the Bible, alone provides answers to the problems of philosophy, including the problem of finding unity in the midst of plurality in the universe. Theistic proofs are valid, but they do not lead unbelievers to true knowledge of God, since these are mere intellectual exercises on the part of unregenerate thinkers, leading to a god of their own devising. No humanly invented theory of truth can embrace, test, or penetrate the knowledge of God. Not the laws of logic or historical evidences, but the disturbing sensus deitatis in

fallen man is the point of contact to be addressed in the unbeliever, who is suppressing the buried truth of his creaturehood. Christian evidences have value only within the context of the Christian philosophy of facts. Facts have true meaning only in Christian theism. Otherwise, the non-Christian automatically interprets all facts in terms of his world view. The metaphysical implications of non-theistic world views lead ultimately to irrationality and skepticism in the absence of a theistic frame of reference. Meaning and knowledge can exist only on the basis of the presupposition of the self-contained God of Scripture.

Some have criticized presuppositionalists of confusing apologetics with evangelism, assuming a disjunction between these approaches to the unbeliever.

CHAPTER 1

THE PRESUPPOSITIONALIST DEFENSE OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

Presuppositional apologetics was defined in the Introduction as "A Christian apologetic system which emphasizes the metaphysical faith assumptions (presuppositions) of alternate world views. This system begins with Christian presuppositions (particularly biblical theism) and attempts to provide a coherent and meaningful explanation of reality." Advocates of this form of apologetics sharply distinguish their approach from that of fideism or subjectivism and what they call "classical" or "traditional" apologetics. Unlike the former, they claim that biblical faith is more than an irrational commitment of the heart. Unlike the latter, they maintain that while biblical faith is indeed rational and logically coherent, it is not properly founded upon rational or evidential argumentation.

Presuppositionalists teach that there are no objective and disinterested observers and that there is no neutrality of language. They stress that language and logic is laded with metaphysical implications and that there is a sharp bifurcation between two classes of humanity, the regenerate and the unregenerate. The unregenerate or unredeemed conceive of reason as "existing above and apart from God,"¹ while the regenerate or redeemed allow no such

¹Jim S. Halsey, For a Time Such as This (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), p. 4.

autonomy in view of their acknowledgement of the created character of human rationality and its consequent subordination to the sovereign mind of God. Consistent presuppositionalists, therefore, allow no epistemological common ground between themselves and non-Christians. This shapes their approach to argumentation and leads them to employ an indirect method rather than the direct method used by non-presuppositional or classical apologists.

The presupposition of divine revelation is central to this apologetic system, and proponents begin with a view of the person and work of God derived from this biblical revelation which they hold to be self-attesting. They criticize the traditional approach of beginning with general revelation and concluding with special revelation, asserting instead the primacy of special revelation. General revelation leads only to tentative and distorted conclusions not because it is inherently problematic, but because it is incorrectly interpreted by the unregenerate human consciousness. Presuppositionalists acknowledge that as an apologetic, general revelation "has enjoyed success as the basis of the traditional method and many have become believers from hearing the arguments of natural and rational theology. But this is because they became believers in spite of a faulty theological base."² According to this position, the fall of humanity and the subsequent problem of human sin and rebellion against God have corrupted man's ability to correctly interpret and respond to natural

revelation. Thus, special revelation and the divine grace to apprehend it as such are necessary prerequisites to the redemption of any individual.

Another distinctive of presuppositionalists is their perception of the scope of apologetics as an "organic part of the theological discipline"³ as opposed to a perception of apologetics as a prolegomenon to theology. They integrate apologetics and systematics in an effort to make apologetic method consistent with orthodox theology. Significantly, presuppositionalists equate the latter with Reformed theology which stresses the sovereignty of God and the absence of autonomous human choice. Presuppositionalism as an apologetic system was formulated out of and depends upon Calvinism.

Strict presuppositionalists are critical of Reformed theologians who employ "Arminian" apologetic methods (i.e., evidentialism and rationalism), claiming that a Reformed theology demands a Reformed apologetic. Van Til, for example, accused Carnell of inconsistency because of his traditional defense of the authority of Scripture.⁴ Consistent presuppositionalism "insists upon assuming the truth of the existence of the Christian God as the logical and

²Ricki Alan Goodin, "Ultimate Presuppositionalism and General Revelation" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1976), p. 24.

³Halsey, For a Time, p. 6.

⁴Gordon R. Lewis, "Van Til and Carnell--Part I," in Jerusalem and Athens, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974), pp. 349-68.

necessary starting point of all thinking, logic, meaning, possible communication, interpretation and apologetics."⁵

Some proponents of this apologetic system appeal to the apostle Paul's defense before the Athenian council of the Areopagus in Acts 17:16-34 and the first part of his epistle to the Romans as clear examples of presuppositional method. According to Greg L. Bahnsen, this includes the suppression and misuse of the knowledge of God mediated through general revelation as well as an appeal to "the truth held down deep within the heart of the unregenerate man."⁶ Presuppositionalists regard their approach as a return to the biblical method of defense and criticize other approaches as inadequate and inconsistent with the biblical doctrines of divine sovereignty and "total depravity."

Presuppositionalists note that by the second and third centuries, rationalist and evidentialist methods of Christian apologetics became predominant. However, the presuppositionalist stance of the primacy of faith and revelation was not totally eclipsed. H. van der Laan, for example, cites Duns Scotus' avoidance of "the arguments of natural reason" in his critique of the

⁵Goodin, "Ultimate Presuppositionalism," p. 4.

⁶Greg L. Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics," in Foundations of Christian Scholarship, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1976), p. 220.

philosophers of his time.⁷ Duns Scotus was a presuppositionalist in the sense that he approached philosophical inquiry "from the viewpoint of faith and theology based on a supernaturally interpreted revelation."⁸ But it was John Calvin who provided the underpinnings of modern presuppositional thought. Calvin insisted in his Institutes of the Christian Religion that every human mind has an implanted sensus divinitatis.⁹ However, human depravity renders both internal and external general revelation incapable of creating a true knowledge of God. Only special revelation accompanied by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit can overcome this deficiency. Calvin did not completely discount Christian evidences, but claimed that they play a confirming role after this spiritual witness. Ramm summarizes Calvin's position on the vindication of the Christian world view in these words:

Therefore the certification of the Christian faith is not to be found in the utterances of a proposed infallible Church; nor in rationalistic Christian evidences; nor in the appeals of philosophers to reason; nor is [sic] ecstatic experiences of the Holy Spirit. It is to be found in the knowledge of God as Creator and Redeemer; it is to be found in the union of Word and Spirit; it

⁷H. van der Laan, "Nature and Supernature According to Duns Scotus," in The Idea of a Christian Philosophy, ed. Herman Dooyeweerd (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1973), p. 74.

⁸Ibid., p. 76.

⁹John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 1:5:2; John Baillie, The Idea of Revelation in Recent Thought (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 8.

is to be found in special revelation centering on the person of Christ and affirmed by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Faith and Reason

The presuppositionalist defense of the Christian world view takes a different orientation to the issue of faith and reason than do rationalistic and evidential apologetics. Presuppositionalists regard the latter as falling within the Thomistic tradition of Intelligo ut credam, understanding in order to believe. They protest that this approach stems from an attempt to escape the bondage of divine authority and replace it with human autonomy, and that any such attempt is doomed from its inception because it undermines all authority. Presuppositionalists argue instead from a more Augustinian tradition of Credo ut intelligam, believing in order to understand. They maintain that revelatory theism is not an irrational position, but is in fact the precondition and basis for human rationality.

Reason and faith are not antithetical. Faith without reason leads to skepticism and reason without faith does so also. Human knowledge is possible only on the basis of divine revelation; Augustine rightly held that all knowledge is faith. Empiricism and rationalism both go astray because they ignore revelation as the source of truth. Rationality permeates the revelational outlook: the Logos is at the beginning and center and climax of divine disclosure. Christianity has never offered itself as a refuge from rationality; rather it emphasizes the rational difficulties and inconsistencies of alternative views of reality and life.¹¹

¹⁰Bernard Ramm, Varieties of Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), p. 178.

¹¹Carl F. H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority, 6 vols. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-83), 1:200.

Presuppositionalists insist that human reasoning must not attempt to be creatively constructive; it is receptively reconstructive. If autonomous rationality is given the status of a secondary instrument of revelation, it becomes another final authority. But "Revelation is not a possibility of man but solely of God in his self-disclosure."¹² Thus, the choice must be made between submitting reason to revelation or revelation to reason.

Presuppositionalists stress the noetic effects of sin, though they do not agree on the extent of these effects. In an interview, Francis A. Schaeffer made this remark about human reason:

We are fallen, and there's no way to start from a finite and move to the infinite--we'll draw the wrong conclusions. But human reason still functions and, as Paul argues in Romans 1, the evidence is adequate. So adequate that we can be called disobedient if we don't bow to it.¹³ Schaeffer's starting point is presuppositional, but his apologetic strategy incorporates rationalistic elements. Other apologists like John C. Whitcomb, Jr. and Cornelius Van Til regard the effects of sin as more profoundly deleterious to rationality. While man bears God's image, he hinders and suppresses his innate knowledge of the true God. According to Whitcomb,

. . . man is not a neutral, unbiased observer in spiritual matters, capable of sitting in judgment as one religion after another passes before him in review, waiting to find one that is logically coherent, historically and

¹²Ibid., 1:199.

¹³Francis A. Schaeffer, "Schaeffer on Schaeffer, Part II," Christianity Today, 6 April 1979, p. 26.

scientifically factual, and personally satisfying, before adopting it as his own!¹⁴
According to this approach, people are not in a position to demand revelatory credentials. Summarizing position of Abraham Kuyper on the cognitive effects of the fallen state, Bernard Ramm writes:

In virtue of the derangement of the logical faculty with reference to divine things, and in virtue of the status of the magisterial word of God, there can be no testing or verification of Christian revelation, nor do we as sinners possess such criteria for validating revelation.¹⁵
Ultimately for presuppositionalists, it is only the grace of God and the convicting work of the Spirit of God which can overcome this cognitive, moral, and volitional problem. Regenerative faith is not seen as a response to evidence or rational argumentation, but as a supernatural gift of God.

Epistemological Verification

Presuppositionalists are generally opposed to testing the truth claims of Christianity by rationalistic or empirical criteria of verification, because this places revelation before the bar of what must thereby become a higher authority. Instead, Scripture is "self-attesting," and requires no human vindication.

On the other hand, most presuppositionalists engage in critiques of other epistemological approaches and necessarily employ logical criteria to do so. They justify this procedure by emphasizing that their starting point is built

¹⁴John C. Whitcomb, Jr., "Christian Evidences and Apologetics" (class syllabus, Grace Theological Seminary, n.d.), p. 42.

¹⁵Ramm, Varieties, p. 191. Italics deleted.

on a revelatory base which alone provides an Archimedean point which lies outside of the immanence of creation. This transcendent foundation for rationality (e.g., Herman Dooyeweerd's philosophy of the Wetsidee, or cosmonomic idea) is openly acknowledged as the presupposition from which everything else is derived. By contrast, they argue that other epistemological systems are self-refuting because they build upon an immanent rather than a transcendent base. Rousas J. Rushdoony notes that all philosophical systems employ basic presuppositions which are in fact "'self-evident' prejudices of a religious nature. These religious dogmas are assumed to be axioms of thought and remain unexamined and undetected because the non-Christian has no vantage from which to be critical of philosophy . . ."16 Both empiricism and rationalism are criticized as epistemologies which when brought to their logical conclusions lead inevitably to skepticism. Car. F. H. Henry, Gordon L. Clark, Francis A. Schaeffer, and Robert L. Reymond argue that since all other presuppositions have failed, revelation should be accepted as the proper starting point. For them this is not fideism but the only true basis for rationality. While all systems ultimately beg the question by arguing in a circle, only the circle of revelatory theism is large enough to encompass all of reality and avoid the dilemma of absurdity. Fundamental assumptions are unavoidable, and the ideal of a presuppositionless objectivity cannot be attained. Without the axiom of

¹⁶Rousas John Rushdoony, Introduction to Herman Dooyeweerd, In the

divine revelation as the basis for theological and philosophical truth, neither inductive nor deductive reasoning will lead to an apprehension of ultimate reality.

Theistic Proofs

Presuppositionalists generally reject the traditional a priori and a posteriori arguments for the existence of God. This follows from their position that reason must operate within the context of faith, not vice versa. Any adequate proof would necessarily have to presuppose God in its premises.¹⁷ Clark, for example, admits that the theistic world view cannot be unequivocally demonstrated to be true, but adds that the same problem applies to every world view:

. . . if theism does not admit of strict proof, the same is not less true of the anti-theistic systems of pragmatism, pantheism, and materialism. In this respect therefore theism is under no greater disadvantage than is any other system. Basic world views are never demonstrated; they are chosen.¹⁸

As a presuppositionalist, Clark affirms the need to use the axiom of revelation as the proper epistemological starting point. Beyond this point, however, he employs the more rationalistic criteria of contradiction and coherence to vindicate Christian theism. Though opposed to the use of natural theology,

Twilight of Western Thought (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1972), p. x.

¹⁷Ronald H. Nash, "Gordon Clark's Theory of Knowledge," in The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), p. 154.

Clark engages in indirect justification of the theistic position by means of an argument from the nature of truth and from coherence (i.e., the implications of theism versus those of contending world views).

Os Guinness, an associate of Schaeffer, repudiates "the scholastic attempt, based on rationalistic premises, to argue the way to God intellectually, solely by the use of general revelation without special revelation."¹⁹ The theistic position that the universe is not a closed spatio-temporal system but is open to its infinite-personal creator is held presuppositionally by both Guinness and Schaeffer. Nevertheless, Schaeffer's treatment of the basic problem of metaphysics is an effort to teleologically demonstrate the necessity of the theistic presupposition, and his approach to the problems of morals and epistemology is a pragmatic attempt to support the existence of God by showing that human behavior is consonant with the implications of theism in these areas.

Strict presuppositionalists like Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, Spier, and Van Til are less rationalistic in their orientation than Clark and Schaeffer. The former appeal to the revealed concept of the imago Dei, arguing that in spite of their philosophy, the unregenerate have a knowledge of the true God which they

¹⁸Gordon H. Clark, A Christian Philosophy of Education (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1946), pp. 40-41.

¹⁹Os Guinness, The Dust of Death (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 346.

are suppressing. Spurning theistic argumentation, these apologists instead seek to refute the epistemological foundation of nontheistic positions.

Critiques of Other World Views

This approach to Christian apologetics denies that there are any raw facts; no one objectively perceives facts in a philosophical vacuum. Facts are interpreted and colored by cognitive frameworks that are held consciously or unconsciously. Thus, presuppositionalists are opposed to evidential attempts to validate Christianity. Instead, they seek to assist non-Christians by assuming their position, exposing their basic faith assumptions, and taking them to the logical conclusion of those assumptions to show that they lead to tension and skepticism and provide no valid answers to the fundamental questions of meaning and existence. Henry summarizes this apologetic approach:

To be sure, we cannot commit others to the truth of revelation simply by theoretical argument, but we can demote and demolish nonrevelational counterclaims. Men do not appropriate the Christian revelation through conviction reached solely on the basis of rational argument. Personal faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but truth is God's revelational provision, and the Spirit uses truth as a means of persuasion and conversion.²⁰ In a sense, the unbeliever's cognitive glasses are "cemented" on so that he cannot simply remove them and view the world through theistic glasses. There is a spiritual and volitional barrier that can only be overcome through the agency of the Spirit of God. But as Henry notes, the Spirit uses truth to bring people to the

²⁰Henry, God, Revelation, 1:228.

point of making the paradigm shift from a nontheistic to the theistic world view, and this is where the apologetic task comes in.

Presuppositionalists differ over the extent to which rational argumentation should enter into this process. Clark believes that the implications of the primary axioms behind each philosophical system can be comparatively evaluated to determine the degree to which each provides "plausible solutions to many problems," and the degree to which each may be self-contradictory.²¹ Stricter presuppositionalists are less inclined to engage in a comparative analysis on this level, preferring instead to equate apologia with kerygma.

Critiques of Other Philosophers and Theologians

Presuppositional apologists characteristically engage in extensive and specific critiques of philosophers and theologians who are opposed to Reformed theology. In The God Who Is There, for example, Schaeffer draws a sharp contrast between "historic Christianity" and "the new theology." In The Church Before the Watching World, he traces the rise of theological liberalism vis-à-vis naturalism, existentialism, and mysticism, and concludes that because it rejects any "propositional, verbalized communication from God," it reduces to religious

²¹Gordon H. Clark, A Christian View of Men and Things (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952), p.34; cf. Weaver, "Gordon Clark: Christian Apologist," p. 289.

words and not religious truth.²² "Historic Christianity and either the old or the new liberal theology are two separate religions with nothing in common except certain terms which they use with totally different meanings."²³

In Communication and Confrontation, S. U. Zuidema provides another example of a Reformed critique of twentieth-century society and thought including that of John Dewey, Karl Jaspers, Maurice Blondel, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann.²⁴ Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company's Modern Thinkers series also illustrates the presuppositional approach to contemporary philosophical and theological thought. Two of the monographs in this series are by Zuidema (Kierkegaard and Sartre),²⁵ and the others include Rousas J. Rushdoony's Freud,²⁶ G. Brillenburg Wurth's Niebuhr,²⁷ H. Van Riessen's

²²Francis A. Schaeffer, The Church before the Watching World (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1971), p. 71.

²³Ibid.; cf. Harold Whitney, The New "Myth"-ology (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969).

²⁴S. U. Zuidema, Communication and Confrontation (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1972).

²⁵Idem, Kierkegaard, trans. David H. Freeman (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960); Sartre, trans. Dirk Jellema (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960).

²⁶Rousas J. Rushdoony, Freud (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965).

²⁷G. Brillenburg Wurth, Niebuhr, trans. David H. Freeman (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960).

Nietzsche,²⁸ Herman Ridderbos's Bultmann,²⁹ A. D. R. Polman's Barth,³⁰ David H. Freeman's Tillich,³¹ and C. Gregg Singer's Toynbee.³² Clark also contributed a monograph on Dewey and another on William James to this series.

²⁸H. Van Riessen, Nietzsche, trans. Dirk Jellema (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960).

²⁹Herman Ridderbos, Bultmann, trans. David H. Freeman (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960).

³⁰A. D. R. Polman, Barth, trans. Calvin D. Freeman (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960).

³¹David H. Freeman, Tillich (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962).

³²C. Gregg Singer, Toynbee (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965).

CHAPTER 2

RECENT PRESUPPOSITIONALIST APOLOGISTS

Although presuppositionalism is rooted in Calvinistic thought, few Reformed theologians practiced this apologetic method until the twentieth century. As observed in the previous chapter, Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, Herman Dooyeweerd, Carl F. H. Henry, Gordon H. Clark, and Francis A. Schaeffer are among the more prominent advocates and refiners of this system of Christian defense. Some of these apologists take a strict presuppositional stance while others have a more general presuppositional orientation.

Carl F. H. Henry

For over thirty years, Henry has been a leading evangelical theologian. His recently completed six-volume work, God, Revelation and Authority³³ is the definitive statement of his theological position. In it he maintains that transcendent cognitive revelation is the basic epistemological axiom from which all other truth must be derived.

Divine revelation is the source of all truth, the truth of Christianity included; reason is the instrument for recognizing it; Scripture is its verifying principle; logical consistency is a negative test for truth and coherence a subordinate test. The task of Christian theology is to exhibit the content of biblical revelation as an orderly whole.³⁴

³³Carl F. H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority, 6 vols. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-83).

³⁴*Ibid.*, 1:215. Italics deleted.

This revelation-axiom is not merely a theoretical postulate but a product of the "self-revealing activity of God."³⁵ As a presuppositionalist, Henry criticizes evidentialists who begin with a defense of the resurrection and use this historical event to adduce the validity of the Bible as a divine revelation. Contrary to Pinnock and Montgomery, Henry states that an historical appeal to the resurrection apart from any dependence on New Testament revelational authority cannot establish the meaning and significance of the resurrection. "Historical events are not self-explanatory, least of all the special redemptive acts of the Bible."³⁶ For Henry, the resurrection has meaning only within a revelational and theological context. Presuppositions cannot be avoided, and Henry maintains that the Bible is the Christian's principle of verification. Only within this presuppositional framework are logical consistency and coherence useful as tests of truth. The Christian revelation "convincingly overlaps ineradicable elements of everyman's experience, and offers a more consistent, more comprehensive and more satisfactory explanation of the meaning and worth of life than do other views."³⁷

Henry criticizes empiricism as a way of knowing, particularly with respect to the knowledge of God, because it leads only to epistemological

³⁵Ibid., 1:219.

³⁶Ibid., 1:221.

³⁷Ibid., 1:238.

tentativeness about God's reality.³⁸ Along these lines, he offers a strong critique of Montgomery's whole six-step apologetic system, stating that "At most an empirical test can indicate whether religious beliefs have a perceptually discernible significance. It cannot at all decide the objective meaning or existence of the supraempirical."³⁹ He acknowledges, however, that Christianity is open to disproof and verification. Similarly, he criticizes the rationalistic approach to knowledge which "subordinates the truth of revelation to its own alternatives and has speculated itself into exhaustion,"⁴⁰ but acknowledges that rationalistic criteria are valid within a presuppositional framework.

To vindicate the theistic alternative requires a methodology appropriate to knowledge of God and the truth of revelation; it also requires attention to logical consistency, to the moral demand exerted by the theistic alternative, and to the question of empirical backing.⁴¹

Henry's primary epistemological concern is that divine revelation should precede human postulation. The latter recognizes and elucidates truth; it does not create it. The fall affected human volition, affection, and intellection, but the noetic effects were not utterly damaging. The unregenerate mind is capable of comprehending God's revelation. Nevertheless, "Men do not appropriate the Christian revelation through conviction reached solely on the

³⁸Ibid., 1:85.

³⁹Ibid., 1:262.

⁴⁰Ibid., 1:95.

⁴¹Ibid., 1:255.

basis of rational argument. Personal faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit, but truth is God's revelational provision, and the Spirit uses truth as a means of persuasion and conversion.⁴²

For Henry, reason and faith are not antithetical; "rationality permeates the revelational outlook."⁴³ But rationality must not be placed alongside the Scriptures as an autonomous authority. Instead it must be seen as subordinate to revelational authority because the latter is the basis for human knowledge.

Henry's critiques of religious mysticism, rational and sensuous intuition, philosophical transcendent apriorism (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel), and theological transcendent apriorism (Augustine, Luther, Calvin) all point to the same conclusion that there must be a supernatural rationale of knowledge. "God-knowledge is directly given with self-consciousness and world-consciousness; knowledge of God is not reduced to an inference from the knowledge of the self, nor to an inference from the knowledge of nature, as if God-knowledge were only analogical and inductive."⁴⁴

Gordon H. Clark

Unlike Van Til, Clark is not a pure presuppositionalist, but a presuppositional rationalist. His presuppositionalism is evident in his denial

⁴²Ibid., 1:228.

⁴³Ibid., 1:200.

⁴⁴Ibid., 1:342.

that human reason can create a consistent ethical system or stand in judgment of biblical revelation.⁴⁵ "Sin has corrupted our judgment,"⁴⁶ and there can be no epistemological neutrality or detachment. As a Reformed theologian, Clark maintains that the natural state of humanity is moral rebellion against God; apart from divine revelation, autonomous human reason is incapable of arriving at ultimate truth.

In the areas of history, ethics, science, theology, and education, his position is closer to the presuppositionalism of Van Til than the rationalism of Stuart C. Hackett.⁴⁷ He concludes at the end of his overview and analysis of the divergent metaphysical systems which have been propounded from Thales to Dewey⁴⁸ that the only real choice is between skeptical futility and a word from God. The bankruptcy of philosophical attempts to arrive at truth leads to the need for a presuppositional base as the starting point for all knowledge. "In any system the ultimate principle determines the form of the whole and shows its implications in the details of ethics, physics, and epistemology."⁴⁹ Clark chooses

⁴⁵Gordon H. Clark, A Christian Philosophy of Education (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1946), p. 121.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷R. J. Rushdoony, "Clark's Philosophy of Education," in Nash, The Philosophy, pp. 276-87.

⁴⁸Gordon H. Clark, Thales to Dewey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 534.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 183.

the presupposition of biblical revelation and treats it as an axiom that must be "accepted without proofs or reasons."⁵⁰ While an axiom is immune to proof, it can be evaluated by "its success in producing a system."⁵¹ For Clark, only the axiom of revelation makes knowledge possible and establishes values. "Non-revelational methods cannot provide justification for any moral criteria, and secular historiography has knowledge neither of a goal nor of the meaning of history."⁵²

This choice between dogmatism and nihilism is rebuffed by a number of scholars who argue that it represents a false disjunction between full rationalistic knowledge and complete skepticism. Arthur F. Holmes, for example, proposes that there is a third alternative, partial knowledge, which though not axiomatically demonstrated, is adequate in scope and in rational coherence to provide plausibility. He notes that "The acceptance of such limited knowledge is not skepticism but only the confession of finiteness and fallibility."⁵³

God cannot be known through rational deduction from the evidences of nature; Clark is opposed to natural theology and believes that Hume and Kant

⁵⁰Idem, "The Axiom of Revelation," in Nash, The Philosophy, p. 59.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 60.

⁵²Ibid., p. 80.

⁵³Arthur F. Holmes, "The Philosophical Methodology of Gordon Clark," in Nash, The Philosophy, p. 212.

successfully invalidated all proofs for the existence of God.⁵⁴ Instead, God can only be known through willful self-disclosure. He rebuts the charge of question-begging by stating that this is not unique to Christianity. In any world view, presuppositions which by their nature eliminate their opposites ab initio are unavoidable.⁵⁵ Clark's axiom is not God (as in Spinoza's system), but the God of Scripture. As to the objection that another dogmatic principle other than biblical revelation (e.g., the Koran) could just as well become one's axiomatic starting point, Clark simply responds in this way:

Since all possible knowledge must be contained within the system and deduced from its first principles, the dogmatic answer must be found in the Bible itself. The answer is that faith is the gift of God. . . . The initiation of spiritual life, called regeneration, is the immediate work of the Holy Spirit.

⁵⁴Clark castigates the cosmological argument, claiming in effect that "any proof big enough would have to include God in the premises" (Nash, "Gordon Clark's Theory of Knowledge," p. 154). Nevertheless, Nash argues 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 upon God provides metaphysical consistency. In this respect, the implications of the Christian world view can be critically compared with those of contending world views, and the most promising first principle can be chosen. The second form of justification stems from the nature of truth. Here Clark claims that "whatever knowledge man may derive of God from nature is possible only because man possesses an apriori 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 apriori knowledge of God present in the soul. If man sees God in nature, it is because he already knows God in his mind" (Nash, "Gordon Clark's Theory of Knowledge," p. 157).

⁵⁵Clark, "The Axiom," p. 62.

It is not produced by Abrahamic blood, nor by natural desire, nor by any act of human will.⁵⁶ In the final analysis, his vindication of his philosophical and theological starting point rests solely in divine sovereignty. His Calvinistic perspective becomes especially clear in Biblical Predestination in which he states that the bondage of the human will is such that "no unregenerate person ever wants to be born again."⁵⁷

Building upon his revelational axiom, Clark seeks to arrive at a "systematically coherent Christian philosophy"⁵⁸ rather than a piecemeal, disjointed defense of Christianity. He does not use the law of contradiction to establish biblical authority; instead, he uses the Bible to affirm the validity of the laws of logic as part of the ultimate rationality of God.

As a rationalistic and not a pure presuppositionalist, Clark makes extensive use of the logical law of contradiction as a test of truth. While logic is not prior to Scripture in his exposition, the opponent who challenges this law must assume it in order to attack it; he agrees with Aristotle that "it must be presupposed by anyone who wishes to speak intelligibly."⁵⁹ Clark engages in the apagogic task of reducing non-Christian systems to absurdity by arguing that

⁵⁶Idem, Three Types of Religious Philosophy (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977), p. 123.

⁵⁷Idem, Biblical Predestination (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), p. 89.

⁵⁸Idem, "Secular Philosophy," in Nash, The Philosophy, p. 26.

they lead to epistemological skepticism and by refuting them as inherently self-contradictory. In this vein, he criticizes the linguistic empiricism of logical positivism,⁶⁰ the historical presuppositions of Karl Popper,⁶¹ the pluralism and pragmatism of William James,⁶² the ethical and logical instrumentalism of John Dewey,⁶³ and all forms of empiricism.

Clark has been criticized in his use of consistency because of its inherent limitations as a negative test for truth. Only an omniscient mind can know whether a system is ultimately consistent, and mutually conflicting world views can appear to be self-consistent. "Contradiction is the surest sign of error, but consistency is not a guarantee of truth."⁶⁴ Moreover, presuppositionalists aver that the use of contradiction as a test for truth would place logic rather than God in a position of ultimacy.⁶⁵

⁵⁹Idem, Thales to Dewey, p. 103.

⁶⁰Idem, Three Types, pp. 105-6.

⁶¹Idem, Historiography: Secular and Religious (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1971), pp. 246-53.

⁶²Idem, William James (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973).

⁶³Idem, Dewey (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960).

⁶⁴Gordon R. Lewis, Testing Christianity's Truth Claims (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 120.

⁶⁵Gilbert B. Weaver, "Gordon Clark: Christian Apologist," in Nash, The Philosophy, p. 307.

Another area of criticism is Clark's attempt to "axiomatize" Christian philosophy and theology from his first premise and to "spell out a revelational interpretation of every realm of human experience."⁶⁶ George I. Mavrodes argues that by itself, his axiom

. . . entails nothing interesting or important, either true or false, in the areas of theology, history, ethics, etc. In combination with other premises it does become deductively fruitful, yielding interesting conclusions. It is useful in this way, however, only if we combine it with the premises which are not found in the Bible.⁶⁷

This rationalistic sterility results from a complete rejection of any empirical dimension of knowledge. In his Three Types of Religious Philosophy, Thales to Dewey, and A Christian View of Men and Things,⁶⁸ Clark inveighs against empirical theories of knowledge from Aristotle to the present time. He applies this criticism to historical knowledge in his Historiography: Secular and Religious, arguing that only revelation can provide a basis for a knowledge of history because it cannot be approached from a non-presuppositional point of view.⁶⁹

Similarly, in The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God, he emphasizes the concept of scientific operationalism in an attempt to show that

⁶⁶Lewis, Testing, p. 115.

⁶⁷George I. Mavrodes, "Revelation and Epistemology," in Nash, The Philosophy, p. 236.

⁶⁸Clark, Three Types, pp. 24-81, 86, 124; Thales to Dewey, pp. 392-94, 504-6; A Christian View, pp. 285-325.

scientific laws are not discovered but fabricated as operational constructs.⁷⁰ In this as in other areas, Clark has been criticized for his use of the disjunctive syllogism in trying to overthrow the cognitive value of science to explain its limitations and save propositional revelation.⁷¹ While there are limitations in scientific knowledge, it still has cognitive validity, because as Holmes contests, "it adduces rational schema that are valued for their coherence, their illuminating explanatory power, their empirical scope and their applicability."⁷² Ultimately, Clark's denial of sensory experience as a source of knowledge and his limitation of human knowledge to propositions of the Bible and propositions deduced from those in the Bible is regarded by most apologists as an epistemological cul-de-sac. As Ronald H. Nash observes, "the only way one can come in contact with God's revelation in the Scriptures is through sensory experience."⁷³

In his Religion, Reason and Revelation, Clark attempts to show that divine revelation can be couched in human language. He criticizes logical positivism and contemporary theories of religious language and argues that

⁶⁹Idem, Historiography, pp. 246, 368-71; A Christian View, pp. 37-93.

⁷⁰Idem, The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1977), pp. 28-95.

⁷¹Holmes, "The Philosophical Methodology," p. 206.

⁷²Ibid., p. 208.

⁷³Nash, "Gordon Clark's Theory of Knowledge," p. 174.

words must have univocal rather than analogical or equivocal meanings.⁷⁴ Contra Thomism, he insists that positive, non-symbolic terms can be used of God.

Clark criticizes the ethical systems of utilitarianism, instrumentalism, and existentialism, and argues that non-theistic philosophies cannot justify moral imperatives.⁷⁵ "The secular theories failed because there is no valid argument by which one can start from observable phenomena and reach a conclusion concerning obligation."⁷⁶ Only the ethics based upon divine revelation provide adequate scope for self-interest and "specific guidance in the actual situations of life."⁷⁷

Concerning the problem of evil, Clark denies the Augustinian free-will solution in favor of the Reformed position that states that while God is not responsible for evil, he decrees it.⁷⁸ This illustrates the dependent relationship of presuppositionalism on Calvinistic theology.

Francis A. Schaeffer

⁷⁴Gordon H. Clark, Religion, Reason and Revelation (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1978), pp. 3-27, 119-50.

⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 152-92; "Secular Philosophy," pp. 43-54; "Several Implications," in Nash, The Philosophy, pp. 112-17; A Christian View, pp. 151-93.

⁷⁶Idem, "Several Implications," p. 113.

⁷⁷Idem, A Christian View, p. 189.

⁷⁸Idem, Religion, Reason, pp. 198-241.

The writings of Francis A. Schaeffer have exerted a profound influence on the evangelical Christian community. Writing in a popular style, Schaeffer compares the presuppositions of non-Christian world views with those of "historic" or orthodox Christianity in the Reformed tradition. He utilizes a cultural apologetic and emphasizes the need to understand the thought-forms of modern man to be able to communicate Christianity as a radical alternative.

In Escape from Reason,⁷⁹ The God Who Is There,⁸⁰ and He Is There and He Is Not Silent,⁸¹ Schaeffer asserts the ubiquitous nature of presuppositions that are held consciously and unconsciously. He further states that "no non-Christian can be consistent with the logic of his presuppositions,"⁸² and that only the presuppositions of historic Christianity correspond to and provide an adequate explanation of the form and complexity of the external world and the internal human needs of meaning and purpose, love, and the fear of nonbeing.⁸³

Escape from Reason, Schaeffer's first book, traces the movement in philosophy, art, music, "general culture," and theology of "the line of despair,"

⁷⁹Francis A. Schaeffer, Escape from Reason (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968).

⁸⁰Idem, The God Who Is There (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968).

⁸¹Idem, He Is There and He Is Not Silent (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1972).

⁸²Idem, The God, p. 121.

⁸³Thomas V. Morris, Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 21.

the radical cleavage between grace and nature, between the universals and the particulars, and between faith and rationality. He believes that the polarization in knowledge between meaning and purpose on the one hand, and rationality and logic on the other, can only be overcome by a return to biblical theology. By beginning with the infinite-personal God rather than man, knowledge of the "upper story" and the "lower story" can be unified, and the alternative of absurdity can be surmounted.

Schaeffer argues in The God Who Is There that the modern shift in philosophy, culture, and theology away from an absolute base could have been more successfully averted by the use of presuppositional as opposed to classical apologetics:

The use of classical apologetics before this shift took place was effective only because non-Christians were functioning, on the surface, on the same presuppositions, even if they had an inadequate base for them. In classical apologetics though, presuppositions were rarely analysed, discussed or taken into account.⁸⁴

This shift involved a transition from antithetical to dialectical thinking which began first in the loss of a unified field of knowledge in philosophy. Because of the presupposition of the uniformity of natural causes in a closed system and the concomitant rejection of the supernatural, Schaeffer maintains that the only consistent remaining options were nihilism or a return to Reformation theology. The former was unacceptable because man cannot live in alienation and without

⁸⁴Schaeffer, The God, p. 15.

the benefit of an antithetical methodology. The latter appeared intellectually unacceptable, and thus the only remaining option, albeit inconsistent, was a romantic "leap of faith" into the realms of mysticism and existentialism. This philosophical turn gradually influenced other segments of culture and became manifest in art, language, music, literature, and theology.⁸⁵

Because of the naturalistic presupposition of uniform causality within a closed system, the Christian alternative, which alone can provide genuine continuity and true rationality, was rejected. Schaeffer contends that the impersonal plus time and chance cannot account for human personality, rationality, and morality, and thus leads to a dilemma on each of these levels.⁸⁶ His apologetic strategy is to overcome the language barrier by avoiding Christian jargon, apprehend the other person's position, and take him to the logical conclusions of his non-Christian presuppositions. Only by "lifting the roof" in this way will a person discover the tension inherent in his inconsistency. Ultimately, Schaeffer says that the human dilemma is moral, not merely metaphysical.⁸⁷

In He Is There and He Is Not Silent, Schaeffer develops a tripartate metaphysical, moral, and epistemological argument for the existence of the infinite-personal God. As a presuppositionalist, he appears to reject the

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 13-84.

⁸⁶Ibid., pp. 87-115.

traditional theistic proofs, but he believes that the revelatory perspective of Christian theism is the only way to make sense out of the order of the universe and the personality of man. In the final analysis, the basic presuppositional choice regarding the nature of the universe is either (1) "that it is an autonomous, self-contained, random or self-regulated entity of matter-energy;" or (2) "that there is a more basic reality than the physical universe which is a temporally limiting and spatially causing force in relation to that open system."⁸⁸

Schaeffer's metaphysical argument for God focuses on the complexity of the universe and the personality of man.⁸⁹ Man is not a "sufficient integration point for himself,"⁹⁰ and Schaeffer illustrates this by discussing the nature of human personality. If the latter is real (and Schaeffer argues that no one who denies its reality can live consistently with this view), the nature of human aspirations and intelligence can only be sufficiently grounded in an ultimately personal universe; the impersonal cannot give rise to the personal.

In his moral argument for God, Schaeffer contends that without an absolute base, "there are no final categories concerning right and wrong."⁹¹ After insisting that only a personal beginning can keep morals and metaphysics

⁸⁷Ibid., pp. 119-42.

⁸⁸Morris, Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics, p. 19.

⁸⁹Schaeffer, He Is There, pp. 1-20.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 2.

separate and avoid de Sade's conclusion that "What is, is right," Schaeffer lays stress upon the importance of the "moral discontinuity" that resulted from the fall:

Man, made in the image of God and not programmed, turned by choice from his proper integration point at a certain time in history. When he did this, man became something that he previously was not, and the dilemma of man becomes a true moral problem rather than merely a metaphysical one. Man, at a certain point of history changed himself, and hence stands, in his cruelty, in discontinuity with what he was, and we have a true moral situation: morals suddenly exist. Everything hangs upon the fact that man is abnormal now, in contrast to what he originally was.⁹²

Schaeffer's epistemological argument begins with a critique of logical positivism followed by a presentation of the difficulties attending a nonlogical movement toward meaning, especially as manifested in existentialism. In essence, his answer to the problem is that propositional revelation from the infinite-personal God overcomes the discontinuity between nature and grace and provides a unified field of knowledge. The presupposition of biblical revelation provides an adequate epistemological framework for the relationship between subject and object and the distinction between fact and fantasy.⁹³ Schaeffer's primary contention in all his apologetic works is that "all people constantly and

⁹¹Ibid., p. 25.

⁹²Ibid., p. 30.

⁹³Ibid., pp. 37-88.

consistently act as though Christianity is true⁹⁴ in the realms of metaphysics, morals, and epistemology.

Thomas V. Morris in his book, Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique, regards Schaeffer's thinking as a combination of presuppositionalism and an experiential teleological argument. Morris contends that Schaeffer overextends the validity of his arguments, draws conclusions that have unproven specifications, and frequently uses arguments that are overstated and ambiguous. However, he allows that while Schaeffer does not demonstrate the necessity of his position, he does move toward "the possibility of orthodox Christian trinitarian theism."⁹⁵

Geisler categorizes Schaeffer's test for truth as pragmatic because of his emphasis on the unlivability of dysteleology. In this respect, "crucial to the falsity of the non-Christian view is its unlivability while the truth of Christianity is confirmed by its livability and experiential verification."⁹⁶ Colin Brown in Philosophy and the Christian Faith commends Schaeffer for seeking to present an integrated view of the whole of life while taking the Bible seriously.⁹⁷ Unlike more rationalistic apologists, Schaeffer "presents his philosophy as a belief-

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 70.

⁹⁵Morris, Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics, p. 35.

⁹⁶Norman L. Geisler, Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 110.

system" without demonstrating every part of it, and contrasts this system with the implications of naturalistic presuppositions.⁹⁸ On the other hand, Gordon R. Lewis correctly observes that Schaeffer's use of presuppositions is not unlike the hypothesis testing of the rationalist apologist Edward John Carnell in that "they are subject to testing by the coherence criterion of truth."⁹⁹ This verificational dimension of Schaeffer's apologetics is illustrated in his suggestion that "philosophical proof and religious proof follow the same rules."¹⁰⁰ He offers two tests of truth: (1) "The theory must be non-contradictory and must give an answer to the phenomenon in question."¹⁰¹ (2) "We must be able to live consistently with our theory."¹⁰² Here, Schaeffer agrees with Carnell that truth must be horizontally self-consistent and it must vertically fit the facts.¹⁰³

It is in this area that Schaeffer and other presuppositionalists have been criticized for a formalized or depersonalized perspective of human thought. In his books, he does not fully acknowledge the nonlogical contributions of every

⁹⁷Colin Brown, Philosophy and the Christian Faith (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1969), p. 265.

⁹⁸Ibid., pp. 265, 274.

⁹⁹Lewis, Testing, p. 298.

¹⁰⁰Schaeffer, The God, p. 109.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Ibid.

human knower to his own knowledge, and the dynamic of noncognitive steps which can move toward as well as away from evidence. As Holmes observed in an allusion to Schaeffer's failure to see how metaphysical objectivity can be combined with epistemological subjectivity in his book, All Truth Is God's Truth,

Much recent philosophy has moved back from this rationalism to a more fully personal view of knowledge and truth. Sometimes it has swung all the way to the other extreme of relativism, and often it has lost the theistic basis for truth, but at least it has begun to see the essentially personal nature of knowledge and truth which the Scriptures contributed to earlier Western thought. The solution to existential despair and to theological and ethical relativism is not to be found in a return to the rationalism that failed us before, but in advancing to a fuller and more Biblical understanding of the interdependence of personal and propositional truth.¹⁰⁴

Thomas V. Morris has similarly criticized Schaeffer's "mechanical model of human thought" in which he "expects certain arguments to prove the necessity of Christian claims and concurrently to elicit an assent from the reader to the truth of those claims."¹⁰⁵

Schaeffer has written a number of other books which have apologetic implications. Death in the City, a critique of modern Western culture, concludes with a contrast between the presuppositions of materialism and Christianity in

¹⁰³Edward John Carnell, An Introduction to Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), pp. 56-62.

¹⁰⁴Arthur F. Holmes, All Truth Is God's Truth (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), pp. 47-48.

¹⁰⁵Morris, Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics, p. 105.

terms of the way in which the universe is apprehended.¹⁰⁶ Pollution and the Death of Man offers a Christian perspective on ecological problems.¹⁰⁷ How Should We Then Live? analyzes the loss of absolutes in Western thought and culture and discusses the implications from a Christian perspective.¹⁰⁸ Back to Freedom and Dignity outlines Schaeffer's alternative to Skinnerian behaviorism.¹⁰⁹ Art and the Bible presents a number of perspectives that contribute to a Christian view of art.¹¹⁰ The Church at the End of the 20th Century,¹¹¹ The Church before the Watching World, and A Christian Manifesto¹¹² are appeals to the Christian community to corporately model the reality of the Christian world view in practice as well as precept.

Other Presuppositional Apologists

¹⁰⁶Francis A. Schaeffer, Death in the City (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1969), pp. 127-43.

¹⁰⁷Idem, Pollution and the Death of Man (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, 1970).

¹⁰⁸Idem, How Should We Then Live? (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1976).

¹⁰⁹Idem, Back to Freedom and Dignity (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1972).

¹¹⁰Idem, Art and the Bible (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973).

¹¹¹Idem, The Church at the End of the 20th Century (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1970).

¹¹²Idem, A Christian Manifesto (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1981).

Abraham Kuyper

The influential Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) was a committed Calvinist and a leader of the Reformed Church in Holland. The middle third of his most significant work, Theological Encyclopedia, has been translated into English as Principles of Sacred Theology.¹¹³ In this work, Kuyper accepted Calvin's view of the unregenerate as having an innate knowledge of God which has been distorted by the destructive effects of sin in intellect, morality, and volition. Nothing short of palingenesis, or regeneration, can overcome these effects, and the knowledge that leads to palingenesis must come from special, not general revelation. Kuyper stressed that in spite of common grace, there is little common ground between the regenerate and the unregenerate; both approach the world with different mentalities and axioms.

Special revelation is necessary to the production of theology, or what Kuyper called the science of God. The Christian revelation cannot be tested or verified, because this would require a verification principle that is higher than revelation. The noetic effects of sin are such that Christian evidences will not get through without the prior acceptance of Christian principles. For the person who rejects divine authority, no demonstration will be effective; scientific and

¹¹³Abraham Kuyper, Principles of Sacred Theology (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968).

historical investigation will not produce the fruit of faith.¹¹⁴ The faith that is associated with palingenesis cannot be derived from a response to evidence. Instead, it requires the special grace of God in the witness of the Spirit.¹¹⁵

Kuyper's development of the apologetic implications of Calvinistic theology made a profound mark on all subsequent presuppositionalists.

Herman Dooyeweerd

The Dutch presuppositionalist Herman Dooyeweerd was Professor of Philosophy of Law at the Amsterdam Free University which was founded by Abraham Kuyper. In his four-volume work, A New Critique of Theoretical Thought, Dooyeweerd developed what he called a transcendental criticism of theoretical thought.¹¹⁶ For him, there is no such thing as secular autonomous thought that arises with no dependence upon religious presuppositions. Philosophical thought has an underlying religious root that is related to a transcendent origin and destiny of reality which Dooyeweerd called the "law-idea" or the "cosmonomic idea." In this massive work, he analyzes the entire range of theoretical thought and distinguishes a progressive hierarchy of fifteen

¹¹⁴Ibid., pp. 386, 430.

¹¹⁵Ramm, Varieties, pp. 179-95; C. Samuel Storms, "A Critical Analysis of the Empirical Apologetic Method," (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977), pp. 57-67.

¹¹⁶Herman Dooyeweerd, A New Critique of Theoretical Thought, 4 vols., trans. David H. Freeman and H. De Jongste (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969).

increasingly complex "law-spheres" by which the universe is governed. This hierarchy begins with space and time and moves from the inorganic to the biotic, and ascends up the scale of human intellectual, ethical, and religious patterns. Each sphere anticipates the next through a scheme of intermodal coherence.

Dooyeweerd's In the Twilight of Western Thought begins with the presupposition of biblical revelation and explicates how all of the cosmonomic spheres are ordered by laws instituted by God. Non-Christian philosophy, with its ostensibly autonomous rationality, leads to tension, paradox, and antinomy by absolutizing one aspect of creation and therefore rendering it void of meaning. The implications of this cosmonomic idea of philosophy for presuppositional apologetics relate primarily to its critique of the modern intellectual climate and its emphasis upon the starting point of special revelation as the basis of a coherent philosophy that synthesizes the truths of faith and reason.¹¹⁷

D. H. Th. Vollenhoven

Dooyeweerd's brother-in-law, D. H. Theodoor Vollenhoven, was Professor of Philosophy at the Amsterdam Free University. He was the cofounder of the cosmonomic school of Reformational philosophical thought,

¹¹⁷J. M. Spier, An Introduction to Christian Philosophy (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1970); Samuel T. Wolfe, A Key to Dooyeweerd (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1978); Gordon H. Clark, "Several Implications," pp. 94-102; Harold O. J. Brown, "The Conservative

and specialized in philosophical historiography. Vollenhoven maintained that there are a limited number of types of philosophical responses to recurrent meaning-problems, and sought to develop a transcendental Christian critique of other philosophies.

Vollenhoven points beyond the usual combination of immanent critique (which examines lingual consistency and clarity and tries to straighten out analytic contradictions detected in a thinker) and transcendent criticism (which simply judges the other's error seen from the critic's standpoint).¹¹⁸ Instead, his transcendental critique "asks Christian questions within the other thinker's assumed framework."¹¹⁹ Vollenhoven's presuppositional system is similar to Dooyeweerd's.

Robert L. Reymond

Reymond's The Justification of Knowledge is a significant defense of presuppositional epistemology.¹²⁰ In it, he defends the "self-attesting authority" of Scripture in opposition to rationalistic or empirical methods of defending biblical authority. To test the truth claims of Scripture "as over against other truth claims . . . prior to acceptance of it is itself an immoral act indicative of self-

Option," in Tensions in Contemporary Theology, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Alan F. Johnson (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), pp. 337-42.

¹¹⁸Calvin G. Seerveld, "Biblical Wisdom Underneath Vollenhoven's Categories for Philosophical Historiography," in Dooyeweerd, The Idea, p. 135.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 136.

¹²⁰Robert L. Reymond, The Justification of Knowledge (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976).

acclaimed autonomy which can be assumed only upon apostate grounds."¹²¹ Reymond develops a Reformed theory of knowing which states that there are no non-theistic facts in the universe; after criticizing non-biblical epistemology, he concludes that the only real basis for knowing is the divine image in man. Knowledge cannot be justified apart from a transcendent reference point, that is, a comprehensive universal.¹²²

Like other presuppositionalists, Reymond stresses the implications of the noetic effects of sin and the noetic effects of palingenesis. His apologetic method essentially consists of a presentation of the biblical message in conscious dependence upon the convicting work of the Spirit of God. He also seeks to answer specific questions and assumes the unbeliever's position when necessary in order to demonstrate the epistemological implications of a non-Christian starting point.¹²³

Greg L. Bahnsen

A professor of apologetics at Reformed Theological Seminary, Greg L. Bahnsen defends presuppositional methodology in the tradition of Van Til. He supports the thesis that "Man's knowledge must be a receptive reconstruction of

¹²¹Ibid., p. 20.

¹²²Ibid., pp. 42-85.

¹²³Ibid., p. 134.

God's original and creative knowledge,"¹²⁴ and argues that there can be no presuppositional neutrality in scholarship. In addition, he states that because of the natural state of human rebellion, it is only by the grace of God that anyone arrives at the presupposition of biblical truth.

Bahnsen perceives the apologetic situation as a controversy between two antithetical systems of thought which involve ultimate commitments and assumptions.¹²⁵ "Even laws of thought and method, along with factual evidence, will be accepted and evaluated in light of one's governing presuppositions."¹²⁶ The biblical apologist must begin with the starting point of the Bible as his self-evidencing presupposition and work on the unbeliever's unacknowledged presuppositions to show that they do not lead to the possibility of knowledge. Bahnsen adds that "The apologist should appeal to the unbeliever as the image of God who has God's clear and inescapable revelation, thus giving him an irradicable knowledge of God."¹²⁷ Finally, the apologist should present biblical truth as the only condition of intelligibility and salvation from the effects of sin.

John C. Whitcomb, Jr.

¹²⁴Greg L. Bahnsen, "Biblical Apologetics" (class syllabus, Reformed Theological Seminary, 1976), chapter 12.

¹²⁵Ibid., chapter 18.

¹²⁶Ibid.

¹²⁷Ibid.

Whitcomb, a professor at Grace Theological Seminary, states in his "Christian Evidences and Apologetics" that the apologist must reason within a circle; the Bible is the only circle which includes the entire scope of reality.¹²⁸ Like other presuppositionalists, he contends that people in their natural state are not neutral observers but active enemies of the one true God, the knowledge of whom they suppress but cannot ultimately deny because of the inherent image of God.

¹²⁸Whitcomb, "Christian Evidences," p. 42.

CHAPTER 3

THE PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL

Introduction

Cornelius Van Til is undisputedly the most prominent proponent of presuppositional apologetics. While Augustine, Calvin, and Kuyper argued from a presuppositional base, Van Til was the first to systematize presuppositionalism as a formal apologetic system. "As the doctrines of Calvinism were obviously taught but not organized into a system until the time of Calvin, so also the principles of presuppositionalism were used but not organized until the time of Van Til."¹²⁹ Greg L. Bahnsen claims that Van Til "has done for apologetics what Calvin did for theology."¹³⁰

Since 1928, when he began to teach at Princeton Theological Seminary and soon afterward at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Van Til has been developing a large output of apologetic literature which reflects the Reformed tradition in theology. He acknowledges that his understanding of philosophy was directly influenced by D. H. Th. Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd. Van Til has aggressively sought to refute "classical" (rationalistic

¹²⁹James F. Duddleston, "The Presuppositional Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1973), p. 60.

¹³⁰Greg L. Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics," in Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1976), p. 239.

and evidential) apologetic methods and replace them with a method which is more consonant with the anthropological, hermeneutical, and soteriological implications of Calvinistic theology. His influence through many years of teaching and writing has been extensive, and Christian apologists are generally polarized over the method he has formulated. As David W. Diehl has observed,

One group praises Van Til for his consistent anti-natural theology, pro-biblical approach to defending the faith. Another group views Van Til as failing to have a valid defense for the faith, and sees him more as a dogmatic theologian than an apologist.¹³¹

Whether in support or rebuttal, the large number of books and articles that have been devoted to Van Til demonstrates the significance of his work.¹³²

¹³¹David W. Diehl, "Van Til's Epistemic Argument: A Case of Inadvertent Natural Theology" (faculty paper, The King's College, n.d.), p. 1.

¹³²These books include: James Daane, *A Theology of Grace: An Inquiry Into the Evaluation of Dr. C. Van Til's Doctrine of Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954); Rousas John Rushdoony, *Van Til* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960); Rousas John Rushdoony, *By What Standard? An Analysis of the Philosophy of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1965); E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971); North, *Foundations*; John Frame, *Van Til the Theologian* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Pilgrim Publishing Company, 1976); Jim S. Halsey, *For a Time Such as This: An Introduction to the Reformed Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976); Charles A. Clough, *Giving the Answer*, 2nd ed., rev. (Lubbock, Texas: Lubbock Bible Church, 1977); Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *Every Thought Captive* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979); and Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1980).

Van Til's apologetic method stems from the covenantal theology of sovereign grace and stands within the circle of the presupposed truth of biblical Christianity. He challenges the "natural" or unregenerate man's assumption of "the idea of brute fact in metaphysics and the idea of the autonomy of the human mind in epistemology."¹³³ Because philosophical presuppositions cannot be avoided, there are no neutral facts; conclusions are already inherent in one's epistemological starting point. Van Til's primary contention is that only the presupposition of the self-contained God of Christian theism can provide a coherent basis for human knowledge.

While the Christian presupposes the triune God, the non-Christian presupposes a dialectic between chance and regularity, "the former accounting for the origin of matter and life, the latter accounting for the current success of the scientific enterprise."¹³⁴ The Christian and the non-Christian both claim that their systems are coherent, but the facts and experience they appeal to are interpreted in the light of their philosophical starting points. Similarly, both claim self-consistency, but logic alone cannot determine the nature of ultimate reality.

¹³³Cornelius Van Til, "Apologetics" (class syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, n.d.), p. 96.

¹³⁴Idem, "My Credo," in Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, p. 19.

Van Til maintains that the traditional approaches to Christian apologetics cannot break this deadlock, and proposes what he calls "a consistently Christian methodology" that involves the following seven theses:

1. That we use the same principle in apologetics that we use in theology: the self-attesting, self-explanatory Christ of Scripture.
2. That we no longer make an appeal to "common notions" which Christian and non-Christian agree on, but to the "common ground" which they actually have because man and his world are what Scripture says they are.
3. That we appeal to man as man, God's image. We do so only if we set the non-Christian principle of the rational autonomy of man against the Christian principle of the dependence of man's knowledge on God's knowledge as revealed in the person and by the Spirit of Christ.
4. That we claim, therefore, that Christianity alone is reasonable for men to hold. It is wholly irrational to hold any other position than that of Christianity. Christianity alone does not slay reason on the altar of "chance."
5. That we argue, therefore, by "presupposition." The Christian, as did Tertullian, must contest the very principles of his opponent's position. The only "proof" of the Christian position is that unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of "proving" anything at all. The actual state of affairs as preached by Christianity is the necessary foundation of "proof" itself.
6. That we preach with the understanding that the acceptance of the Christ of Scripture by sinners who, being alienated from God, seek to flee his face, comes about when the Holy Spirit, in the presence of inescapably clear evidence, opens their eyes so that they see things as they truly are.
7. That we present the message and evidence for the Christian position as clearly as possible, knowing that because man is what the Christian says he is, the non-Christian will be able to understand in an intellectual sense the issues involved. In so doing, we shall, to a large extent, be telling him what he "already knows" but seeks to suppress. This "reminding" process provides a fertile ground for the Holy Spirit, who in sovereign grace may grant the non-Christian repentance so that he may know him who is

life eternal.¹³⁵

Thus, while both the regenerate and the unregenerate are creatures in God's image and live in God's world, Van Til believes that apart from this, there is no real common ground between them. His method of reasoning by presupposition, then, involves not a "point of contact" but a "point of conflict"¹³⁶ in a direct collision between the Christian and the non-Christian systems. Negatively, Van Til reasons "from the impossibility of the contrary,"¹³⁷ by seeking to show that on the basis of the assumptions of any non-theistic system, its epistemology is self-defeating. Positively, he appeals to the sensus divinitas and the veritates aeternae which are imprinted naturally on the human spirit.¹³⁸ In fact, "there are no atheistic men because no man can deny the revelational activity of the true God within him."¹³⁹ The natural man knows he is a creature of God, but seeks to cover up this fact and suppresses the pressure of God's

¹³⁵Ibid., p. 21. Van Til earlier presented the same seven theses in different words in The Defense of the Faith, 3rd ed. rev. (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 298-99.

¹³⁶Norman L. Geisler, Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 57.

¹³⁷Cornelius Van Til, A Survey of Christian Epistemology (Nutley, New Jersey: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969), p. 205.

¹³⁸Idem, Common Grace and the Gospel (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1972), p. 55.

¹³⁹Ibid.

revelation in nature.¹⁴⁰ Because of this, the apologetic endeavor must be dependent upon the sovereign work of the Spirit of God.

Bahnsen summarizes the major features of Van Til's apologetic method in this way:

In addition to the transcendental necessity of presupposing the existence of the Creator God, the self-attesting authority of Christ the Son speaking in Scripture, and the concrete biblical understanding of man as both possessing yet suppressing the knowledge of God, Van Til should be known for his apologetical dependence upon the powerful work of God's Spirit in bringing men to renounce their would-be autonomy (which is in principle destructive of all experience and intelligible understanding) and bow before Christ as He commands them to in His inspired word.¹⁴¹

Apologetic Method

Reformed Versus Arminian Apologetics

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Presbyterian and Reformed churches struggled over encroaching modernism. A breach developed between those who defended historic Calvinism and those who moved in the direction of theological liberalism. But within the conservative Calvinistic camp, another rift developed over the way in which the Calvinistic position should be defended. Those of the "Old Princeton" school, including B. B. Warfield, William Brenton Greene, Jr., Charles Hodge, and Floyd E. Hamilton, advocated the classical approach to Christian apologetics which fell in the tradition of Aquinas'

¹⁴⁰Idem, "Apologetics," p. 98.

¹⁴¹Bahnsen, "Socrates or Christ," p. 238. Italics deleted.

Contra Gentiles and Butler's Analogy.¹⁴² At the same time, the Dutch Reformed theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck argued that such an approach is inconsistent with Reformed theology's Augustinian and Calvinistic roots. This is the heart of R. J. Rushdoony's later criticism of the Old Princeton apologetic method:

To believe that man can reason his way to the faith constitutes a form of Arminianism; it is an affirmation that the natural man can receive the things of the Spirit of God, and that he can know them (I Corinthians 2:14). To attempt to reason man into faith, or to appeal to a rationalistic apologetics is thus to set up reason rather than God as ultimate, because it asks the sinful and fallen reason of the natural man to assess and judge God.¹⁴³

Similarly, Cornelius Van Til argues that Calvinistic theologians who follow the traditional method of apologetics derived from Arminian theologians have allowed their apologetic to lag behind their theology.¹⁴⁴ He agrees with Warfield's theological position, especially with respect to the inspiration of Scripture, but takes issue with Warfield's appeal to the reason of natural man because of its inconsistency with the implications of Reformed theology.¹⁴⁵ In the same way, he criticizes Charles Hodge's use of the traditional method of

¹⁴²Van Til, Defense, p. 260.

¹⁴³R. J. Rushdoony, "Clark's Philosophy of Education," in The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), p. 276.

¹⁴⁴Van Til, Defense, pp. 3-5.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 260-66; Jack B. Rogers, "Van Til and Warfield on Scripture in the Westminster Confession," in Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, pp. 154-65.

apologetics and endorsement of reason as a means of evaluating a revelation.¹⁴⁶ Van Til instead follows Kuyper by beginning with the Christian theistic position rather than reasoning "to the full theistic position from a standpoint outside of it."¹⁴⁷ He contends that a choice must be made: a person can either use reason to stand in judgment of the credibility of the Christian revelation, or he can renounce his perception of himself as ultimate. Arminian apologetics promotes the first; Reformed theology does the latter.

Van Til insists that it is "logically quite impossible for the natural man, holding as he does to the idea of autonomy, even to consider the 'evidence' for the Scripture as the final and absolutely authoritative revelation of the God of Christianity."¹⁴⁸ Apart from the Reformed faith, theology and philosophy "lead ultimately to a universe where chance is placed above God."¹⁴⁹ Jim S. Halsey, in a discussion of the centrality of epistemology in Van Til's work, draws this conclusion:

Thus, to be understood correctly, Van Til's apologetic must be seen as interdependent upon his theology. And this theology is in turn conditioned by his doctrine of Scripture. Non-Reformed apologetics, on the other hand, attempts to cut away a part of Christianity from the rest of the "system" and make it intelligible to the apostate reason. This "part" may be the

¹⁴⁶Van Til, Defense, pp. 80-89; Foreword to Halsey, For a Time, p. ix.

¹⁴⁷Robert D. Knudsen, "Progressive and Regressive Tendencies in Christian Apologetics," in Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, p. 283.

¹⁴⁸Van Til, Defense, p. 142.

¹⁴⁹Halsey, For a Time, p. 15.

resurrection of Christ, or the doctrine of inspiration, or any number of other "facts."¹⁵⁰

Van Til maintains that the traditional method of rational and empirical apologetics compromises the biblical doctrine of God, the clarity, necessity, sufficiency, and authority of God's revelation, the biblical doctrine of man's creation in the image of God, and the doctrine of the sinfulness of mankind.¹⁵¹ The fact that this method has been employed for so long by Reformed theologians has "stood in the way of the development of a distinctly Reformed apologetic."¹⁵²

Natural Theology and General Revelation

Natural theology attempts to establish the existence and nature of God by means of universal human experience without appealing to a special revelation.¹⁵³ According to the doctrine of general revelation, God's character is revealed through the physical creation and through the rational and moral consciousness of humanity. Aquinas accepted both natural theology and general revelation while Barth rejected both. Calvin acknowledged the general revelation of God through creation but spurned natural theology as illegitimate because of the noetic effects of human depravity. Van Til agrees with Calvin's

¹⁵⁰Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁵¹Van Til, Defense, pp. 257-59; "My Credo," pp. 18-19.

¹⁵²Van Til, Defense, p. 259.

¹⁵³Diehl, "Van Til's Epistemic Argument," p. 2.

position and holds that "apart from the special revelation of Scripture and the illumination of the Holy Spirit man is unable to properly interpret the message about God that is objectively present in nature."¹⁵⁴ According to Van Til, "After sin has entered the world, no one of himself knows nature aright, and no one knows the soul of man aright. How then could man reason from nature to nature's God and get anything but a distorted notion of God?"¹⁵⁵ Unbelievers in their pride and rebellion against God have rejected the supernatural aspect of divine revelation and have suppressed and perverted the natural revelation of God as well. Instead of being "receptively reconstructive" (thinking God's thoughts after him as analogically manifested in revelation), they have sought to reason autonomously, and in doing so, have blurred the Creator-creation distinction.¹⁵⁶

Natural theology at best could only lead to an impersonal first cause, not the personal God of the Bible. This is because of its false starting point: "We do not first defend theism philosophically by an appeal to reason and experience in order, after that, to turn to Scripture for our knowledge and defense of

¹⁵⁴Ibid., p. 3.

¹⁵⁵Cornelius Van Til, An Introduction to Systematic Theology (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1971), p. 72.

¹⁵⁶Dennis Ray Hillman, "The Use of Basic Issues in Apologetics from Selected New Testament Apologies" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979), p. 20.

Christianity. We get our theism as well as our Christianity from the Bible."¹⁵⁷ Nevertheless, general revelation is perfectly clear and provides absolute certainty of the existence of God. In view of this, there is no basis for theistic arguments which seek to establish a high probability for the existence of some kind of deity. The revelation of God's existence is both extrinsic and intrinsic; everyone has an indelible knowledge of the God of the Bible. It is because of unregenerate man's moral and spiritual rebellion that this sensus deitatis on the psychological level has been distorted on the epistemological level by his self-conscious interpretations of reality.

In spite of all this, Van Til does employ an aprioristic approach to natural theology in his assertion that God is rationally necessary as the ultimate ground of the principles of reasoning. God's existence is actually presupposed in the intelligibility of human predication.¹⁵⁸ Van Til summarizes his position in these words:

. . . the existence of the God of Christian theism and the conception of his counsel as controlling all things in the universe is the only presupposition which can account for the uniformity of nature which the scientist needs. But the best and only possible proof for the existence of such a God is that his existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all things in the world. We cannot prove the existence of beams underneath a floor if by proof we mean that they must be ascertainable in the way that we can see the chairs and tables of the room. But the very idea of a floor as the support of tables and chairs requires the idea of beams that

¹⁵⁷Van Til, Defense, p. 8.

¹⁵⁸Idem, Psychology of Religion (Nutley, New Jersey: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1971), p. 59.

are underneath. But there would be no floor if no beams were underneath. Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism. Even non-Christians presuppose its truth while they verbally reject it. They need to presuppose the truth of Christian theism in order to account for their own accomplishments.¹⁵⁹

He realizes, however, that a demonstration of the irrationality of non-theistic philosophy will not in itself win a person over to the theistic position. Objective validity must not be confused with subjective acceptability to the natural man. Because of the spiritual condition of the unregenerate, the latter can only be accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is upon this that the Reformed apologist must rely.¹⁶⁰

Presupposition of Biblical Authority

Christian Versus Non-Christian Views of Authority

Van Til repeatedly stresses that one must choose between two conflicting theories of knowledge: God or man as the final court of appeal. If we elect to determine the foundations of an authority, the authority is no longer accepted on its own authority.¹⁶¹

The non-Christian view of authority is derived from a principle of autonomous human reason. This involves the assumption that the final criterion of truth lies within man. "Every form of authority that comes to him must justify

¹⁵⁹Idem, Defense, p. 103.

¹⁶⁰Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 32.

itself by standards inherent in man and operative apart from the authority that speaks."¹⁶² This autonomous form of authority is twofold: brute factuality and rationality. In a non-theistic universe, however, the former is a product of chance and the latter reduces to impersonal principles of logic which have no absolute underpinning. "The laws of logic are assumed as somehow operative in the universe, or at least legislative for what man can or cannot accept as possible or probable."¹⁶³ Such an assumption has no basis in a universe in which chance is ultimate. Because there is no rationality to chance, any position which is derived from a non-theistic authority base leads finally to irrationalism and self-contradiction. This is why modern philosophy and science is phenomenistic; ultimate reality cannot be known, since interpretive systems are necessarily relative to the human mind.¹⁶⁴

By contrast, the Christian view of authority is derived from a theistic base. Brute or independent facts do not exist because every detail in the cosmos is a part of the sovereign plan of God. Addressing himself to the issue of biblical authority, Van Til writes,

. . . in the Christian view of things it is the self-contained God who is the final point of reference while in the case of the modern view it is the would-

¹⁶²Ibid., p. 128; "Apologetics," p. 83.

¹⁶³Idem, A Christian Theory of Knowledge (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), p. 13.

¹⁶⁴Idem, Defense, p. 127; "Apologetics," p. 82.

be self-contained man who is the final point of reference in all interpretation.

For the Christian, facts are what they are, in the last analysis, by virtue of the place they take in the plan of God.¹⁶⁵

Neither the world nor the human mind are neutral; the perception, investigation, and interpretation of reality is contingent upon the reception or rejection of divine authority. Limited to subjective criteria, the natural man will fail to interpret reality correctly because it can only be interpreted in the light of God who has given reality its meaning.¹⁶⁶

Reasoning by Presupposition

For Van Til, the question of the proper starting point is crucial in view of the unique metaphysic, epistemology, and ethic of the Christian doctrine of the self-contained God or ontological Trinity. No method of reasoning can be neutral because every method "presupposes either the truth or the falsity of Christian theism."¹⁶⁷ Van Til maintains that the method of reasoning by presupposition is consistent with the epistemological implications of the Christian world view. This is an indirect method rather than the direct appeal to facts and laws held in common by both Christians and non-Christians which is characteristic of the traditional evidential and rationalistic approaches to

¹⁶⁵Idem, Introduction to The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible, by Benjamin B. Warfield, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948 [1892-1915]), p. 18.

¹⁶⁶Duddleston, "Presuppositional Apologetics," pp. 32-33.

apologetics. The presuppositionalist seeks to go beyond these facts and laws to the final reference point required to make them intelligible. According to Van Til,

The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake, in order to show him that on such a position the "facts" are not facts and the "laws" are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument's sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible.¹⁶⁸

Because of the mutual influence of starting point, method, and conclusion, circular reasoning cannot be avoided. But there is a significant difference between Christian and non-Christian circularity. Defending Van Til's position, Richard L. Pratt notes that Non-Christian circularity consists of the attempt to justify the groundless assumption of independence by independent thought and results from the sinner's inability to do otherwise apart from faith in Christ. Christian circularity, however, consists of the recognition that nothing is more ultimate than the authority of God and His Word. The former is the evidence of futile thought struggling to support itself. The latter is the proof of enlightened minds returning to the only one without need of further support.¹⁶⁹

In view of this circularity, the indirect method of presuppositional reasoning is needed to explicate the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions that control Christian and non-Christian thinking. Halsey states that the argument of the presuppositionalist "will not seek to appease man's reason, but rather will attack the very assumptions upon which the apostate

¹⁶⁷Van Til, Defense, p. 100; "Apologetics," p. 62.

¹⁶⁸Idem, Defense, pp. 100-101; "Apologetics," p. 62.

¹⁶⁹Pratt, Every Thought Captive, pp. 55-56.

reason conceives itself to function."¹⁷⁰ There must, in fact, be a "head-on collision with the systems of the natural man,"¹⁷¹ because the non-Christian's interpretation of reality is controlled by three basic assumptions:

. . . (a) that man is not a creature of God but rather is ultimate and as such must properly consider himself instead of God the final reference point in explaining all things; (b) that all other things beside himself are non-created but controlled by Chance; and (c) that the power of logic that he possesses is the means by which he must determine what is possible or impossible in the universe of Chance.¹⁷²

Van Til seeks to strip away the supposed autonomy of the unregenerate and place them in their true position as finite creatures.¹⁷³ This requires what he calls a "block-house methodology" which presents Christian theism as a unit. Every proposition and historical fact must derive its meaning from the context of the system of Christian theism contained in Scripture.¹⁷⁴ Truth must not be seen atomistically, but as a unit; every particular depends upon its relation to the whole. Only upon the presupposition of the sovereign and self-contained God can there be an ultimate basis for reason. "Facts and logic, not based upon the creation doctrine and not placed in the context of the doctrine of God's all-embracing Providence, are without relation to one another and therefore wholly

¹⁷⁰Halsey, For a Time, p. 79.

¹⁷¹Van Til, Defense, p. 99.

¹⁷²Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁷³Halsey, For a Time, p. 80.

¹⁷⁴Van Til, Defense, p. 115.

meaningless."¹⁷⁵ Thus, Van Til readily admits his presupposition but attempts to cause non-Christians to become aware of their own. Having done this, he is then in a position to take them to the logical conclusions of their presuppositions and demonstrate their self-defeating implications.

Self-attesting Nature of Scripture

Van Til repeatedly emphasizes that the Christian's starting point must be the self-attesting Christ of Scripture.¹⁷⁶ The God of the Bible is presupposed as the Christian's final reference point in predication, and Scripture as a divine revelation is to be accepted on its own authority. It cannot be authenticated by external criteria of verification because the latter would need to be authenticated, and an infinite regression would be unavoidable. The Christian must accept 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."¹⁷⁷ Concerning the biblical revelation of the person and work of Christ, Van Til states,

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

¹⁷⁵Ibid., p. 230.

¹⁷⁶Idem, "My Credo," p. 3.

¹⁷⁷Idem, "Apologetics," p. 67.

only go to Scripture. Faith in the self-attesting Christ of the Scriptures is the beginning, not the conclusion of wisdom!¹⁷⁸ Thus, the final acceptance of the Bible as the authoritative word of God must be derived from itself; nothing outside of the Bible can properly be used to verify it since everything else derives its meaning from the biblical interpretation of reality.¹⁷⁹ In addition, the inward testimony of the Spirit bears witness to the authority of the word in the life of the believer.

Inspiration and Infallibility of the Bible

For Van Til, the rejection of the traditional view of Scripture as an infallible revelation from God is tantamount to the rejection of orthodox Christianity. He criticizes those who recede from the position of biblical infallibility to a position of general trustworthiness, arguing that they "do not in the least thereby shield themselves against the attack of the modern principle" which is built upon the assumption of "absolute contingency in the sphere of fact."¹⁸⁰ Such an assumption would disavow the possibility that any historical fact could be infallibly interpreted and lead to the conclusion that no authoritative system of truth could be established.

Attempts by rationalistic apologists to build a case for biblical authority fail because the logical criteria of verification to which they appeal would rule

¹⁷⁸Idem, "My Credo," p. 15.

¹⁷⁹Idem, Doctrine of Scripture (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 22-23.

out a God whose nature is impenetrable to the human intellect. Attempts by evidential apologists to bolster the inspiration of Scripture by appealing to raw facts and evidences always fall short of demonstration because they fail to recognize that facts are really "interprefacts," that is, interpreted with respect to one's world view. Evangelicals whose theology is essentially Arminian "have done and are doing excellent detail work in the defense of Scripture but they lack the theology that can give coherence to their effort."¹⁸¹ For Van Til, the Reformed doctrine of a sovereign, self-contained God who providentially sustains his creation alone provides a basis for a consistent defense of the infallibility of Scripture. "It is only on this basis that the modern idea of revelation as event without being at the same time in part man's own interpretation of event can be opposed at every point."¹⁸² Van Til drew this conclusion at the end of his introduction to the 1948 edition of Warfield's The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible:

The presupposition of all intelligible meaning for man in the intellectual, the moral and the aesthetic spheres is the existence of the God of the Bible who, if he speaks at all in grace cannot, without denying himself, but speak in a self-contained infallible fashion. Only in a return to the Bible as infallibly inspired in its autography is there hope for science, for philosophy, and for theology. Without returning to this Bible science and philosophy may flourish with borrowed capital as the prodigal flourished for a while with his father's substance. But the prodigal had no self-

¹⁸⁰Idem, Introduction to Warfield, Inspiration, pp. 16-17.

¹⁸¹Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁸²Ibid., p. 29.

sustaining principle. No man has till he accepts the Scripture that Warfield presents.¹⁸³

Epistemology

Regenerate and Unregenerate Reason

Central to Van Til's epistemology is his sharp distinction between Christian and non-Christian reason. Any appeal to reason in general overlooks the fact that the reason employed by the non-Christian "attempts to shed its created character and attempts to transform itself into a timeless uncreated logic."¹⁸⁴ The fallen or unregenerate consciousness denies its creaturehood and refuses to be receptive of God's interpretation of reality. Instead, it seeks to be creatively constructive as it establishes itself alongside of or in opposition to revelation as an independent source of knowledge. When this happens, the sphere of nature (autonomous human reason) prevails over and ultimately eclipses the sphere of grace (divine revelation).¹⁸⁵

Van Til rejects any such Thomistic and Kantian dualisms, asserting instead that all knowledge must be derived from the God of the Bible; only within the theistic framework can facts be correctly interpreted. This regenerate consciousness is receptively reconstructive in that it responds to divine

¹⁸³Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁸⁴Halsey, For a Time, p. 88.

¹⁸⁵Van Til, Defense, p. 49.

revelation and "wants to interpret reality in terms of the eternal one and many."¹⁸⁶

Common Ground and the Point of Contact

Unlike the "traditional" apologetic approaches which reflect Arminian and Roman Catholic theologies, Van Til's Reformed position leads him to stress the uncommonness of Christian and non-Christian thinking. If the metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions of any non-Christian world view are carried to their logical conclusions, they would share no ground in common with the interpretations and conclusions derived from the Christian world view. As Diehl observes, "Van Til refuses to admit anything in common with the non-Christian unless it be seen first in relation to the God of Christian theism."¹⁸⁷

In spite of this theoretical lack of common ground, Van Til maintains that in the actual situation, no one can live consistently with the logical implications of non-Christian philosophies. The fallen condition of humanity has distorted but not eliminated the imago Dei. Thus, the sensus deitatis, though often repressed, continues to be a universal part of the human experience. Van Til contends that sin is a breaking loose from God ethically, but not metaphysically. "Sin is the creature's enmity and rebellion against God but is not

¹⁸⁶Ibid.

¹⁸⁷Diehl, "Van Til's Epistemic Argument," p. 4.

an escape from creaturehood."¹⁸⁸ This rebellion has led to the frustrated attempt to generate a cognitive autonomy and interpret everything without reference to God. Van Til repeatedly rejects the legitimacy of "the natural man's assumption of himself as the ultimate reference point in interpretation."¹⁸⁹ The effects of this rebellion against God on the unregenerate consciousness are profound, but not fully consistent. The natural man cannot escape the knowledge of God by obliterating the sense of deity within him.¹⁹⁰

This sensus deitatis, then, is the point of contact that the presuppositionalist can employ. An appeal to unregenerate reason will be fruitless, but an authoritative presentation of Scripture as the Word of God can strike the sense of deity that "lies underneath his own conception of self-consciousness as ultimate."¹⁹¹ This conviction requires the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, and Van Til affirms the need to be dependent upon the special grace of God in the apologetic task. "It is upon the power of the Holy Spirit that the Reformed preacher relies when he tells men that they are lost in sin and in need of a Savior."¹⁹²

¹⁸⁸Van Til, Defense, p. 46.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., p. 93.

¹⁹⁰Idem, Systematic Theology, p. 27.

¹⁹¹Idem, Defense, p. 95.

¹⁹²Idem, "Apologetics," p. 65.

Despite repeated efforts to suppress the natural revelation of God about and within man, the perspicuity of the internal knowledge of the law of God and the awareness that man is a covenant-breaker continues to provide assurance of a viable point of contact. In Common Grace and the Gospel, Van Til stresses that the image of God and the daily manifestation of general revelation allows no one to completely escape the truth about God, man, and the world:

. . . when and to the extent that the natural man is engaged in interpreting life in terms of his adopted principles then, and only then, he has nothing in common with the believer. But man can never completely suppress the truth. On necessity he therefore knows that it is wrong to break the law of God.¹⁹³

Van Til adds that there is a "formal power of receptivity" in the consciousness of the non-regenerate that "enables him to consider the Christian theistic position and see that it stands squarely over against his own, and demands of him the surrender of his own position."¹⁹⁴ Thus, while there is no common ground in principle between the Christian and the non-Christian, in practice common ground does exist because of the grace of God and the image of God in the lives of the unregenerate. In this sense, the revelation of God is absolutely clear and certain.

In addition to Van Til's appeal to the human conscience by virtue of the implanted sense of deity and the image of God, he also admits, for all practical purposes, the laws of logic as common ground. In his apologetic method, "he

¹⁹³Idem, Common Grace, p. 163. Italics deleted.

seeks to show the non-Christian by these laws that non-Christian metaphysical positions cannot explain human knowledge or cosmic rationality and that only Christian theism can.¹⁹⁵

Analogical Knowledge and Apparent Antinomies

Van Til contends that human knowledge is analogical of divine knowledge. The latter is determinative and original; the former is subordinate and derivative. He adds that Christian epistemology is unique in its position that comprehensive knowledge is found only in God and not in man. In contrast to the infinite, eternal, and absolute character of God's knowledge, Man's knowledge is finite, temporal, and relative. It is because of this that Van Til asserts that Christianity alone provides an ultimate basis for human rationality:

Christianity is, in the last analysis, not an absolute irrationalism but an absolute "rationalism." In fact we may contrast every non-Christian epistemology with Christian epistemology by saying that Christian epistemology believes in an ultimate rationalism while all other systems of epistemology believe in an ultimate irrationalism.¹⁹⁶

This analogical understanding of human knowledge leads to the problem of paradox and antinomy. However, Van Til is quick to affirm that the antinomies found in God's special revelation of his person and attributes (e.g., divine sovereignty versus human responsibility and the nature of the triune

¹⁹⁴Idem, Christian Epistemology, p. 197.

¹⁹⁵Diehl, "Van Til's Epistemic Argument," pp. 14, 16; Gordon R. Lewis, "Van Til and Carnell--Part I," in Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, p. 353.

Godhead) are apparent and not ultimate. They appear to be contradictions because of the limited and analogical nature of human knowledge. The Christian position "is the only position that does not destroy reason itself," but this does not preclude the apparent contradiction between human responsibility and the counsel of God.¹⁹⁷ Van Til contrasts this apparent level of antinomy with the absolute antinomies that characterize existentialist theologians like Kierkegaard and Tillich.¹⁹⁸

Clark has criticized Van Til's analogical view of human knowledge as leading to skepticism. Clark contends that "An analogical truth, except it contain a univocal point of coincident meaning, simply is not the truth at all."¹⁹⁹ Gilbert B. Weaver, in a defense of Van Til's position, draws a sharp contrast between analogy in the systems of Aquinas and Van Til and concludes that Clark's criticism is invalid because it overlooks this distinction.²⁰⁰ Robert L. Raymond, on the other hand, claims that while it is true that Van Til's use of analogy is not

¹⁹⁶Van Til, Defense, p. 41.

¹⁹⁷Idem, Common Grace, p. 10.

¹⁹⁸Idem, Systematic Theology, pp. 159-99.

¹⁹⁹Gordon H. Clark, "The Bible as Truth," Bibliotheca Sacra 114 (April-June 1957):166.

²⁰⁰Gilbert B. Weaver, "Man: Analogue of God," in Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, pp. 321-27.

Thomistic, there is still a fundamental problem with equivocation in his epistemology.²⁰¹

Van Til's Epistemic Argument

Van Til's method of argumentation seeks to show that "antitheistic knowledge is self-contradictory on its own ground, and that its conception of contradiction even presupposes the truth of Christian theism."²⁰² This method of demonstrating the impossibility of the contrary is regarded by some apologists as a virtual theistic proof. 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.²⁰³

²⁰¹Robert L. Reymond, The Justification of Knowledge (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 97-105.

²⁰²Van Til, Christian Epistemology, pp. 222-23. Italics deleted.

²⁰³Gilbert B. Weaver, "Gordon Clark: Christian Apologist," in Nash, The Philosophy, p. 301.

Similarly, Reymond sees Van Til's apologetic system as "a grand theistic proof."²⁰⁴ Van Til does not present this proof in a formal or syllogistic way, and Reymond offers a six-point outline to clarify the steps:

. . . (1) that there is not one single non-theistic datum in the universe, (2) that all facts are what they are because of the place they occupy in the all-encompassing plan of God, (3) that man's knowledge is possible only because of God's prior exhaustive knowledge, (4) that man's knowledge, if true, is actually a "thinking of God's thoughts after Him," (5) that unless Christian theism is true, the unbeliever could find no meaning in any fact, and (6) that the illegitimacy of human autonomy must be challenged in the name of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture are themes that are not only biblical and Reformed but also "Copernican" in their revolutionary impact upon traditional apologetic methodology.²⁰⁵

Diehl labels the apologetic method which runs throughout Van Til's writings "the epistemic argument" after a term in philosophical theology which refers to an argument for the existence of an omniscient being from the existence of human knowledge.²⁰⁶ In this argument, Van Til seeks to show that based upon his own presuppositions, the non-Christian cannot provide a basis for his assumption that he can make intelligible predications about reality. Apart from biblical theism, there is no "adequate ground for relating universals and logical principles to the particulars of temporal experience."²⁰⁷ Van Til's approach in this argument is aprioristic in that it contends that the intelligibility of any valid

²⁰⁴Reymond, Justification, p. 98.

²⁰⁵Ibid.

²⁰⁶Diehl, "Van Til's Epistemic Argument," p. 5.

²⁰⁷Ibid., p. 6.

human concept presupposes the existence of an omniscient personal creator who is the source of unity and plurality and who thus provides a basis for both the universals and the particulars in man's claim to knowledge. According to Diehl,

Van Til's epistemic argument is of value for at least this reason: it has helped us to see that if one makes chance his ultimate metaphysical principle, then he believes, in spite of and not because of his metaphysics, that he has genuine knowledge of this world rather than that his experience is totally an illusion in the midst of pure chaos or nothingness.²⁰⁸

Diehl further observes that contra Van Til's explicit denial of natural theology, this argument contains an implied natural theology because of his attempt to show that certain characteristics of the God of Scripture (i.e., the eternal one and many, absolute personality, and the source of all unity and diversity) are metaphysical requirements for the claim to human knowledge.²⁰⁹

The Problem of the One and the Many

A central part of Van Til's epistemic argument is the epistemological problem of the one and the many. His challenge to the non-Christian philosopher is to find a metaphysical basis for his belief in the rationality and coherence of the universe and in the human ability to know.

Van Til draws a distinction between the "Eternal One-and-Many" and the temporal one and many, and contends that unless the latter is grounded in

²⁰⁸Ibid., p. 13.

²⁰⁹Ibid., p. 15.

the former, there is no basis for knowledge.²¹⁰ The Trinity is the key to a valid epistemology because in God, the one and the many are equally ultimate. "Unity in God is no more fundamental than diversity, and diversity in God is no more fundamental than unity."²¹¹ In the Godhead, there is an absolute unity and diversity, and this unity and diversity is reflected in the created and temporal one and many.

The Greek philosophers Parmenides and Heraclitus are frequently used by Van Til to illustrate the insoluble problem of combining the unity of a timeless logic with the diversity of temporal particulars apart from the ultimate unity and ultimate diversity in the Trinity. In contrast to the philosophy of Parmenides in which unity is asserted to the exclusion of change, the philosophy of Heraclitus affirms change to the exclusion of unity. This dilemma is unavoidable when the temporal (unity or diversity) is given the status of the eternal. Van Til follows Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven in his rejection of modern attempts to overcome this problem in dialectic philosophy.²¹² Ultimacy belongs not to the created order but to the ontological Trinity, and this eternal source of unity and diversity must be the starting point for all predication.²¹³

²¹⁰Van Til, Defense, p. 25.

²¹¹Ibid.

²¹²Rousas John Rushdoony, "The One and Many Problem--The Contribution of Van Til," in Geehan, Jerusalem and Athens, p. 341.

²¹³Halsey, For a Time, p. 43.

Other Apologetic Issues

Van Til's Approach to Evidences

Van Til is not opposed to the use of historical evidences per se, but to the way they are typically used by evidentialists. When they are used to establish a probable case for the existence of God and the truthfulness of Christianity, the evidentialist compromises the doctrines of Scripture and makes the false assumption of epistemological neutrality. There are no "brute facts;" facts are interpreted in accordance with prior metaphysical presuppositions. Van Til states that "men should not existentially accept the Resurrection unless, in doing so, they received it as part of the entire biblical redemptive framework."²¹⁴ Even if a pragmatist philosopher allows that Christ rose from the grave, "he will say that this proves nothing more than that something very unusual took place in the case of the man Jesus."²¹⁵ Before Christianity can be defended as a historical religion, the theism upon which it is based must be defended.

To interpret a fact of history involves a philosophy of history. But a philosophy of history is at the same time a philosophy of reality as a whole. Thus we are driven to philosophical discussion all the time and everywhere. . . . Evidences deals largely with the historical while apologetics deals largely with the philosophical aspect. Each has its own work to do but they should constantly be in touch with one another.²¹⁶

²¹⁴Cornelius Van Til, Who Do You Say That I Am? (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975), p. 8.

²¹⁵Idem, Defense, p. 8; "Apologetics," p. 2.

²¹⁶Idem, "Apologetics," p. 2. Italics deleted.

Van Til argues in Christian-Theistic Evidences that biblical Christianity must be defended as a unit, and that the facts of the universe cannot be properly interpreted without the Christian theistic base.²¹⁷ Only after making this presupposition will historical facts like the resurrection fall into their proper place:

I see induction and analytical reasoning as part of one process of interpretation. I would therefore engage in historical apologetics. . . . Every bit of historical investigation, whether it be in the directly Biblical field, archaeology, or in general history, is bound to confirm the truth of the claims of the Christian position. 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.²¹⁸

Van Til, then, does not reject the materials of historical apologetics; instead, he seeks to underpin them with a more biblical epistemology and metaphysic.²¹⁹

Thom Notaro observes in Van Til and the Use of Evidence that

. . . all Christian apologists presuppose certain biblical commitments, regardless of whether they are willing to call them presuppositions. The wide discrepancy between Christian apologists arises from the varying degrees of consistency with which they honor those commitments in their apologetic method.²²⁰

When evidences are founded upon the proper epistemological starting point, they have a valid place in the practice of Christian apologetics.

²¹⁷Idem, Christian-Theistic Evidences (Nutley, New Jersey: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1975).

²¹⁸Idem, Defense, p. 199.

²¹⁹Idem, "Apologetics," p. 96.

The Person of Christ

Van Til has written three books which examine the plethora of interpretations of the person and work of Christ. Who Do You Say That I Am? summarizes the ancient, medieval, and modern philosophical responses to Jesus' question. According to Van Til's analysis, the ancient response as influenced by the principles of Greek thought was primarily a rejection of his dominical claims. Medieval man saw Christ as a man-God, a human who had climbed higher on the scale from pure non-being to pure being than others.²²¹ The modern response is that Christ is "Authentic Man," the ideal projection of human autonomy. Van Til rejects all of these responses as inconsistent with the claims of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture.

Christ and the Jews contrasts ancient and modern Jewish thought with Christian thought with respect to the person and work of Christ. Van Til asserts that the modern Jewish perspective of the God of ethical monotheism is "indistinguishable from the God of post-Kantian liberal-dialectic theology."²²² He adds that

The principle of inwardness of which modern Judaism speaks so much is but an accommodation to the principle of inwardness by which modern Protestantism speaks. Judaism uses its principle of ethical monotheism as a means by which to stifle the voice of prophecy and thus indirectly to silence

²²⁰Notaro, Van Til, p. 105.

²²¹Van Til, Who Do You Say, p. 61.

²²²Idem, Christ and the Jews (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), p. 96.

the claim of Christ. Modern Protestantism uses the same principle of ethical monotheism as a means by which to substitute a false Christ for the Christ of the New Testament.²²³

In The Great Debate Today, Van Til contends that the Christ of Scripture is not the Christ of modern philosophical and theological thought.²²⁴ He draws a sharp contrast in this book between the Christ of Augustine and the Reformers and the Christ as presented in the works of liberal and dialectical theologians.

²²³Ibid., p. 97.

²²⁴Idem, The Great Debate Today (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1970).

Christian Ethics

Van Til develops his approach to the apologetic implications of ethics in his Christian Theistic Ethics.²²⁵ The will of God as the self-determinate sovereign over the created universe is ultimate; human morality is not autonomous. As such, man's summum bonum is to walk in dependence upon God and attain self-realization in his intellect, aesthetic activity, and volition by delighting in his position as "God's viceregent in history."²²⁶ Van Til contrasts this Christian perspective with non-Christian ethical principles which assume that human morality is autonomous. The only alternative to the Christian view of the ultimacy of the will of God is the assumption of the ultimacy of man's moral consciousness. The unregenerate moral consciousness is "finite and sinful,"²²⁷ and provides no real meaning to moral distinctions. Van Til criticizes non-Christian ethical systems and contrasts the Christian and non-Christian summum bonum.

Psychology of Religion

Van Til states in his Psychology of Religion that his battle with the school of the psychology of religion is not in the field of psychology, but in the field of

²²⁵Idem, Christian Theistic Ethics (Nutley, New Jersey: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1974).

²²⁶Ibid., p. 44.

²²⁷Idem, Defense, p. 54.

epistemology.²²⁸ This is especially telling in the assumption of religious psychologists that descriptive analysis will bring one in touch with reality.

. . . the writers of the school of the psychology of religion have taken a non-Christian point of view for granted when they began their investigation of the religious consciousness. They have simply assumed the philosophy of Chance that underlies modern evolutionary thought and have therefore taken for granted that the human consciousness was somehow operative independently of God. They have taken for granted that the religious consciousness is complete in itself.²²⁹

As a result, this leads to an attempt to dispose of the Christian world view by describing and explaining it out of existence by a tacit replacement of ontology with phenomenology. Van Til maintains that the prior assumption of the truth of the non-Christian position and the consequent attempt to explain everything from the outside inevitably colors and distorts the conclusions made by psychologists of religion regarding the nature of religion, revelation, and conversion.

Philosophical and Theological Critiques

Scattered throughout Van Til's writings are manifold critiques of the presuppositions, methods, and conclusions of "apostate thought." He frequently observes that without the presupposition of the self-contained and eternal One-and-Many, there is an unresolved tension between two opposing epistemological principles: the principle of continuity (rationalism) as illustrated in the

²²⁸Idem, *Psychology*, p. 12.

²²⁹Ibid., p. 17. Italics deleted.

philosophy of Parmenides, and the principle of discontinuity (irrationalism) as illustrated in the philosophy of Heraclitus. Van Til rejects Kant's solution to this problem in the phenomenal-noumenal dualism and believes that Kantian philosophy is the foundation upon which modern philosophy, theology, and science are built.²³⁰

In addition to his discursive critiques of modern philosophers and theologians, Van Til has devoted several books to a more in-depth analysis of current theological trends. In The New Modernism, he appraises the theology of Barth and Brunner.²³¹ He concludes that the Christ of Barth's new evangelicalism is not the Christ of historic Christianity in Karl Barth and Evangelicalism,²³² and rejects Heidegger's existentialist epistemology in The Later Heidegger and Theology.²³³ Van Til also devotes a book, The New Hermeneutic, to a critique of the post-Bultmannian hermeneutical systems of Ernst Fuchs and Gerhard Ebeling.²³⁴

²³⁰Halsey, For a Time, p. 143.

²³¹Cornelius Van Til, The New Modernism, 3rd ed. (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1973).

²³²Idem, Karl Barth and Evangelicalism (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964).

²³³Idem, The Later Heidegger and Theology (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1964).

²³⁴Idem, The New Hermeneutic (Nutley, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974).

Ten Issues in Apologetics

The major distinguishing features of Cornelius Van Til's apologetic system will be summarized by a concise presentation of his approach to the ten critical issues listed in Bernard Ramm's Varieties of Christian Apologetics.²³⁵

The Relationship between Philosophy and Christianity

Van Til observes that philosophical language has largely been formed under non-Christian influence, but he deliberately uses such language in order to maintain a point of contact with non-Christians.²³⁶ He is quick, however, to put Christian content into the language he borrows, because there is no such thing as epistemological neutrality.

As a presuppositionalist, Van Til concentrates on metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. He is convinced that the biblical revelation of the self-attesting God of Scripture carries with it a Weltanschauung which must be consistently embraced. This world view includes a definite epistemology, metaphysic, and moral system which stands in opposition to every other philosophy derived from a non-revelational base. Van Til consistently seeks to show that the Christian philosophy of life alone provides answers to the fundamental problems of philosophy including the problem of finding unity in

²³⁵Bernard Ramm, Varieties of Christian Apologetics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), pp. 17-27.

²³⁶Van Til, Defense, p. 24.

the midst of the plurality of phenomena. No philosophical method that in any way asserts human autonomy is compatible with Reformed theology.

The Value of Theistic Proofs

Van Til holds that, from the beginning, God has been revealed externally in nature and internally in the human consciousness. But due to the fall, the intuitive and reasoning powers of man have been clouded so that the reception of the objectively valid manifestations of the existence of God has been hindered.

Men ought, if only they reasoned rightly, to come to the conclusion that God exists. That is to say, if the theistic proof is constructed as it ought to be constructed, it is objectively valid, whatever the attitude of those to whom it comes may be. 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.²³⁷

Thus, Van Til does not reject the theistic proofs per se, but insists on "formulating them in such a way as not to compromise the doctrines of Scripture."²³⁸ This formulation, however, would be contrary to the theistic proofs as traditionally formulated. Van Til's aprioristic epistemic argument is, in effect, a form of natural theology.

The Theory of Truth

²³⁷Idem, Common Grace, p. 49.

²³⁸Idem, Defense, p. 197.

Van Til sharply criticizes empiricism and rationalism as invalid epistemological approaches. He rejects any theory of truth which would presume to test the validity of revelation and thus reflect human autonomy. The starting point for truth must be the eternal, self-contained God of Scripture. Apart from the transcendent base of the ontological Trinity, one is left with a universe in which chance becomes ultimate without any meaning for the particulars.

The Noetic Effects of Sin

The Reformed position that relates human reason to the depravity of the human condition is clearly central to Van Til's apologetic method. Man's volition, affections, and rationality were profoundly though not completely distorted as a result of the fall. Nevertheless, the common grace of God has restrained the manifestations of sin. Because of the imago Dei, there is a knowledge of God within each person. When this is coupled with the special grace of God in the Holy Spirit's work of conviction of the truth of the divine claims upon one's life, the natural tendency to suppress the truth about God in unrighteousness is overcome, resulting in the regeneration of the individual. The apologist must proclaim the self-attesting Christ in conscious dependence upon this process.

The Character of Revelation

There is a strong emphasis in Van Til's writings on the perspicuity of both general and special revelation. But he also stresses the problem of receptivity in the minds of the unregenerate because of the noetic effects of the fall. The truth about God has been revealed externally in nature and internally in the human conscience, but the Spirit of God must open the eyes of the unbeliever so that he will recognize it as such. In the same way, the Bible is the infallible and self-attesting word of God, but it will not be received as such apart from the special grace of God. Unaided humanity cannot attain the truths that are contained in Scripture through the intellect and five senses. Without the special

grace of God, the natural man will arrogate himself as autonomous and arrive at conclusions which will eliminate by definition the possibility of biblical theism.

The Question of Probability Versus Certainty

Van Til firmly rejects any epistemological approach which leads to a probable conclusion that God exists or that the Bible is trustworthy. For him, the existence of God is absolutely certain, and it is epistemologically self-defeating to affirm any other position. The certainty of biblical theism is not based upon evidence but upon the self-attesting Christ of Scripture and the inner conviction of the Spirit of God.

The Problem of Common Ground or Point of Contact

Because of his presuppositional stance, Van Til has been accused of operating within a closed system without any basis for contact with the unbeliever. In principle, there is no common ground between the regenerate and the unregenerate mind, between the covenant-keeper and the covenant-breaker, and between Jerusalem and Athens. The presupposition of the ontological Trinity stands in radical opposition to the presupposition of the autonomy of man. But in practice, Van Til affirms that there is, in fact, a point of contact between the believer and the unbeliever, in that the latter does not think or live consistently with the implications of his non-Christian presuppositions. This inconsistency exists by virtue of the creation of all people in the image of God which remains in spite of man's fallen condition. This, and not the ostensibly

neutral ground of the laws of logic or historical evidences, is the proper starting point for the Reformed apologist.

The Character of Faith

Van Til does not locate faith in the emotions, but rather in the mind and will. Regenerative faith is a response to the sovereign election and call of God in the life of an individual. This kind of faith is not attained as a result of inductive or deductive argumentation; it is given by the grace of God.

The Status of Christian Evidences

The attempt to defend the truth of the Christian position by marshaling a series of evidences will be ineffective unless the evidences are placed within the context of the Christian philosophy of factuality. Facts are always interpreted in light of prior philosophical presuppositions, and a failure to see this will lead to an unbiblical apologetic method which does not truly challenge the foundation of non-Christian thought. The unbeliever must be led to see epistemically that every fact as such proves the validity of the Christian theistic position.

The Relationship between Faith and Reason

Van Til has often been labeled a fideist because of his starting point of the presupposition of the truth of Christianity and because of his criticism of the use of traditional rationalistic and evidentialistic criteria. But he does not stop on the level of claiming that one should submit to the authority of Scripture because of the authority of Scripture. Instead, he promotes an apologetic method in which the Christian assumes for the sake of argument the presuppositions held by the non-Christian to show that they are epistemologically self-defeating because they lead to atomism, chance, and impersonality. The metaphysical

implications of non-theistic world views ultimately lead to irrationality and skepticism, while those derived from the Christian presupposition of the self-contained God of Scripture provide an absolute base for meaning and knowledge.