

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

July 1996

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Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of his Thought

Reviewed by W. Gary Crampton

It must be said of John Frame, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Escondido, California), that he is a very brave man, a hearty soul. In his latest book, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*,¹ presented in celebration of Van Til's one hundredth birthday, Professor Frame, as the title suggests, attempts to codify the thoughts of his mentor. Earlier writings from the Trinity Foundation have pointed out not only the eclectic concepts of Frame,² but also the paradoxical thoughts of Van Til³ –writings that indicate that the professor's task is not possible. Undaunted, Frame has written some 400-plus pages in which he, to quote the back cover of this volume, "combines deep appreciation with incisive critical analysis of the renowned Westminster apologist's ideas."

The book is divided into six major parts, followed by two appendices (Appendix A is a reprint of Frame's review of *Classical Apologetics*, authored by Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley; Appendix B is

an article by Edmund Clowney on Van Til's preaching). Part One has to do with "Introductory Considerations." Here the author names some scholars who sympathize with Dr. Van Til and others who don't ("debunkers"), speaks about his method of analyzing Van Til, presents a warm and abbreviated history of "Van Til's life and character," and gives us his opinion regarding his mentor's "place in history." He concludes that although Herman Dooyeweerd and Gordon Clark were great Christian thinkers, Van Til is superior. In fact, says Frame, even though Van Til is not the most comprehensive, clearest, or influential thinker of our time, he is "perhaps the most important Christian thinker since [John] Calvin" (44). In this review, we will see if this superlative is justified.

On page 47 Frame makes the claim, not uncommon among Van Tilians, that Gordon "Clark gave to Aristotle's logic the same authority as Scripture." This is a caricature, at best. Rather, like Augustine before him, Clark taught that the laws of logic are the way God thinks, and that these laws are embedded in Scripture. On the same page, Frame writes:

Unlike Van Til, he [Clark] took the term *presupposition* to refer to a hypothesis that could not be ultimately proved, but which could be progressively verified by logical analysis. This indicates some unclarity in

¹ John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (P & R Publishing, 1995).

² John W. Robbins, "A Christian Perspective on John Frame," *The Trinity Review*, Number 93.

³ Robbins, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth* and W. Gary Crampton, "Why I Am Not a Van Tilian," *The Trinity Review*, Number 103.

Clark's mind as to what the ultimate standard of proof really is. If the ultimate standard is God's revelation, then the presuppositions of the Christian faith not only are provable, but also are the criteria by which all other proofs are to be measured.

The unclear thinking here is not Clark's, but Frame's. By definition, that which is a *presupposition* is not provable. That would have to be a *postsupposition*. Or is Frame taking a Humpty-Dumpty view of words? Clark's point is that the axiom (or presupposition) of all Christian thinking is that the Bible is the Word of God. Axioms (or *presuppositions*) cannot be proved; if they could be proved, they would not be axioms. It is interesting, however, that Frame here, as he does later in this book (chapters 10, 14, and 23), acknowledges the fact that Van Til, who is touted as "Mr. Presuppositionalist," is not really a presuppositionalist after all. Why? Because, unlike Clark, he believes that there are proofs for the existence of God and the truth of his Word.

Part Two is entitled "The Metaphysics of Knowledge." According to Frame, this is the strongest part of Van Til's system. Here the author discusses "Van Til's view of the basic nature of human knowledge within a Christian worldview" (51). It also includes "his teaching about the nature of God, the Trinity, the Creator-creation distinction, and the necessity of presupposing God's revelation in all human thought" (398).

But is Van Til really orthodox in this area of Christian theism? What about, for instance, his doctrine of the Trinity? Van Til believed that God is at the same time both one person and three persons. As Frame says: "For Van Til, God is not simply a unity of persons; he is *a person*" (65, italics his). This, to be sure, is not the teaching of orthodox Christianity, which maintains that God is one in essence (or substance) and three in persons. As the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost."

Van Til denied that his concept of the Trinity was a contradiction, yet he "embraces with passion the idea of the apparently contradictory" nature of this view (67). Frame admits that his mentor's view is somewhat novel; he calls it "a very bold theological move" (65). But his attempt to clear up the "apparent contradiction" only aggravates the problem; he retreats with the incredible claim that the Bible is imprecise regarding this essential doctrine of Christianity: "Scripture itself often fails to be precise about the mysteries of the faith" (69). (As a point of interest, in this section [77-78] it becomes quite evident that Frame, and Van Til as well, believe that science can give us knowledge, *i.e.*, true facts and true laws. For a Biblical refutation of this, see Gordon Clark's *The Philosophy of Science and Belief in God*.)

Then there is Van Til's concept of "analogical knowledge" (Chapter 7). He taught that all human knowledge is (and can only be) analogical to God's knowledge; there is no univocal point, no point of coincidence, between God's knowledge and man's knowledge. Propositions, then, cannot have the same meaning for God that they do for man. (As incredible as it may sound, Van Til even went so far as to deny that all truth, with regard to God, is propositional. He did not explain what the phrase "non-propositional truth" might mean.)

The problem here is that if there is no univocal point at which man's knowledge meets God's knowledge, then man can never know the truth. Why? Because God is omniscient, *i.e.*, he knows all truth. Hence, if man does not know what God knows, his ideas can never be true. Or, to say it another way, if Van Til's concept of analogical knowledge were true, then it would not be possible for man to do what Van Til calls on him to do, *i.e.*, "to think *God's thoughts* after him" (92). In fact, it would not be possible for his theory of analogy to be true.

Even though Frame denies it, Clark was correct when he maintained that Van Til's concept of analogical knowledge is much closer to that of Thomas Aquinas than Van Tilians are willing to admit. Such a view, if taken to its logical

conclusion, leads to skepticism. Simply stated, an analogy of the truth is not the truth.

The issue of analogical knowledge brings us to "The Clark Controversy" (chapter 8). In 1944, Cornelius Van Til and eleven other presbyters lodged a complaint against the action of the Presbytery of Philadelphia regarding the licensure and ordination of Gordon Clark in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. There were several matters involved in the "Complaint," but the major items had to do with analogical knowledge and "the incomprehensibility of God." Clark taught that there is a quantitative, but not a qualitative distinction between the contents of God's knowledge and the contents of man's knowledge; that is, the difference in knowledge is one of degree, not of kind. The twelve presbyters disagreed. They denied that there is a univocal point at which God's knowledge meets man's knowledge.

The controversy went on for some time. Finally the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church sided in favor of Clark. For an in depth study of the whole issue, one should read *The Clark-Van Til Controversy*,⁴ by Herman Hoeksema. Hoeksema's analysis of the debate is excellent. In it he exposes the errors of Van Til and his associates. Much to the credit of John Frame, he does criticize Van Til's approach to the Clark controversy. And he concludes the chapter by stating: "Clark and Van Til are together in heaven now. I am pleased to announce that they are reconciled" (113).

In Chapter 11, entitled "The Primacy of the Intellect," we find another flaw in Van Til. He and Frame oppose this principle as it is traditionally expressed by men such as Augustine, Calvin, Machen, and Clark. Van Til averred that there is a three-fold distinction between the powers of the soul: intellect, will, and emotion. According to Frame, Van Til posits that "the human intellect, will, and emotions" are "ontologically equal," but the intellect is "economically" primary (144). This view, as Hoeksema points out, has always been "strongly opposed" by Reformed theologians.⁵

Professor Frame, on the other hand, goes so far as to say that "I think it is advisable for Reformed theologians to avoid advocating the primacy of the intellect" (148). He considers "the traditional concept of the primacy of the intellect" to be "untenable" (170).

According to the Bible, however, the intellect is primary because a person is his mind, his soul, or his spirit. Persons have bodies and emotions, but persons are not bodies or emotions. As Clark and Augustine would say, the body is the instrument of the soul or spirit or mind, which is the person. As a man thinks (not emotes) in his heart, so is he. Revelation is conveyed, not to the body or emotions of man, but to his mind, by means of Biblical propositions. It is the mind (the intellect) of man that needs to be "transformed" (*Romans* 12:1, 2) and "girded up" (*1 Peter* 1:13). It is the mind of fallen man that is at "enmity" with God (*Colossians* 1:21). Men walk in "the futility of their mind" (*Ephesians* 4:17); they are "futile in their thoughts" (*Romans* 1:21).

Van Til embraced the "apparent contradictions" in the Bible. Perhaps this is due to his unbiblical view of logic. Van Til's deprecation of logic, not the misuse of logic, but logic itself, is well known.⁶ In chapter 12, Frame concedes that Van Til believes that many of the doctrines of Scripture are "apparently contradictory." Further, they are not able to be resolved before the bar of human reason. Whereas the Bible claims that "God is not the author of confusion" (*1 Corinthians* 14:33), and that there is nothing which is written in it that we "cannot read or understand" (*2 Corinthians* 1:13), Van Til even goes so far as to say that "all teaching of Scripture is apparently contradictory" (159), *i.e.*, logically paradoxical.

Robert Reymond, in defense of a rational Christianity, argues against the irrationality of Van Til when he writes: "If such is the case [that all Christian truth will finally be paradoxical], [then] . . . it condemns at the outset as futile even the attempt at systematic (orderly) theology . . . since it

⁴ Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* (Trinity Foundation, 1995).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶ See, for example, Robert Reymond, *Preach the Word* (Rutherford House, 1988), 16-35, and Ronald Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Man* (Zondervan, 1982), 99-101.

is impossible to reduce to a system irreconcilable paradoxes which steadfastly resist all attempts at harmonious systematization."⁷ In other words, if Van Til's view of logic and Scripture is taken to its logical conclusion, there could be no system of Biblical truth. At every point, Van Til's peculiar views undermine the Bible.

Sadly, Van Til and others have branded Gordon Clark a rationalist because he believed that we should refuse to accept the "apparent contradictions" found in the Bible. We should, taught Clark, attempt to solve the so-called "paradoxes," to harmonize Scripture with itself. The present reviewer agrees with Hoeksema when he writes: "There is here, indeed, something that is more than amazing, that is really unbelievable, that might almost be catalogued as another paradox: the phenomenon that theologians [Van Til and others] accuse a brother theologian of heresy because he tries to solve problems."⁸

Part Three of this volume is entitled "The Ethics of Knowledge." Here the author deals with Van Til's teaching regarding "the effects of the Fall upon our knowledge" (51). In his own words, Frame says: "I am rather more critical of him [Van Til] in this area than I was in the area of the metaphysics of knowledge" (187). He concludes that here we have "an area of both strength and weakness" (398).

Notably, Frame points out Van Til's inconsistency in positing his concept of the antithesis which exists between Christian and non-Christian thought: "My evaluation is that . . . these formulations are not altogether consistent with one another" (192). Frame doesn't say it, but this is a constant problem with Van Til. Inconsistencies abound.

In chapter 16 we come to Van Til's teaching about "Common Grace." Here again, his position is errant. This is especially true in his view of "the free offer of the Gospel." That is, Van Til speaks of a "well meant offer of salvation to a generality of men, including elect and non-elect" (220). Or to put it another way, Van Til believes that God sincerely

desires the salvation of those whom he has not foreordained to be saved.

John Frame, although he has some criticisms of his mentor in this area, likewise believes that "God wants all individuals to repent, whether or not he has foreordained them to do so" (223). Simply stated, this is preposterous. It is not conceivable that God sincerely seeks the salvation of those whom from eternity he has determined not to save. What is Frame's solution? Simple: "Here we must invoke Van Til's doctrines of paradox and analogical thinking" (223). Quite clever, eh? Whenever Van Tilians run into a problem they call it a paradox and move on. Call it whatever you like, it is irrational. Moreover, as Hoeksema correctly says, it is a form of incipient Arminianism.⁹

The final chapter of Part Three deals with "Rationalism and Irrationalism." Van Til taught that all non-Christian thought, contrary to Christian thought, consists of a constant dialectic of rationalism and irrationalism. It began in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, and it has been that way ever since. Frame writes: "In my view, Van Til's analysis of the history of non-Christian thought in terms of rationalism and irrationalism, together with its theological justification, is one of his best accomplishments. It is scripturally based in its accurate account of the Christian worldview and the unbeliever's negation of it. It is confirmed by analysis of the secular texts themselves" (236).

Part Four is entitled "The Argument for Christianity." In it the author shows "how, on Van Til's view, a believer should argue and defend the gospel to an unbeliever in the light of the metaphysics and ethics of knowledge" (51). But before we learn the "how" of Van Til's way, first we learn the "how not to." So chapters 18-21 give us Van Til's analysis and critique of "the traditional method" of the Church fathers (including Augustine), Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler, and Edward J. Carnell. According to Frame, there are positive and negative elements in Van Til's critique of these other systems of apologetics.

⁷ Reymond, *op. cit.*, 29.

⁸ Hoeksema, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁹ Hoeksema, *op. cit.*, chapters 9 and 10.

Then in chapter 22 we are told that the argument for Christianity must of necessity be circular or "spiral," always resting on the presupposition of God's revelation to man in the Bible. In Van Til's own words: "To admit one's own presuppositions and to point out the presuppositions of others is therefore to maintain that all reasoning is, in the nature of the case, circular reasoning. The starting-point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another" (302). In this sense, of course, what he says is correct.

Finally, in chapter 23, "Reasoning by Presupposition," in the words of the author, "we come now to Van Til's recommended methodology for apologetic witness. Here is, at last, his actual argument—his 'absolute certain proof' of Christian theism" (311).

As seen earlier, Van Til is not a presuppositionalist. Presuppositionalism, by definition, excludes the use of proofs for the presupposition. In his book, *Cornelius Van Til: The Man and the Myth*, John Robbins cites numerous examples where Van Til speaks favorably concerning the proofs of God's existence. Writes Van Til:

"Men ought to reason analogically from nature to nature's God. Men ought, therefore, to use the cosmological argument analogically in order thus to conclude that God is the creator of this universe. . . . Men ought also to use the ontological argument analogically. . . . The argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity is objectively valid. We should not tone down the validity of this argument to the probability level. The argument may be poorly stated, and may never be adequately stated. But in itself the argument is absolutely sound. . . . Thus there is an absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism."¹⁰

These statements are noticeably Thomistic.

What is Van Til's "absolutely certain proof" of "Christian theism"? Says Frame, it is an "indirect" argument: the impossibility of the contrary. In Van Til's words: "The theistic proofs therefore reduce to one proof, the proof which argues that unless this God, the God of the Bible, the ultimate being, the Creator, the controller of the universe, be presupposed as the foundation of human experience, this experience operates in a void. This one proof is absolutely convincing" (313). Van Til seems to confuse "convincing" with "valid."

Van Til goes on: "The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument 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 sake in order that he may be shown that only on such a basis do 'facts' and 'laws' appear intelligible" (313, 314).

The problem here is that if the Christian is formulating his arguments on the presupposition of Biblical revelation, then there is no "theistic proof" at all. It is simply divine revelation, not an argument for God or his Word. Hence, to suggest, as Van Til and some of his disciples do, that the traditional "theistic proofs" can be reformulated in a Biblical fashion, under which they are valid, is absurd.

On the other hand, if the transcendental argument is being used as an *ad hominem* argument, *i.e.*, a *reductio ad absurdum*, then again it proves nothing with regard to the truth of Christian theism. Reducing the opponent's arguments to absurdity, thereby showing him the futility of his own method, is an excellent apologetical tool. But it does not prove the truthfulness of the Christian system. In fact, if all other "systems" could be shown to be false, this would still not prove Christianity to be true. Van Til and his disciples are confused.

What, then, is the conclusion? The "absolutely certain proof" of the "transcendental method" is non-existent. There is no proof for God and his Word. A Christian epistemology begins with the Bible as the Word of God; this is the

¹⁰ Robbins, *Van Til*, 13.

indemonstrable axiom, from which all true theories are to be deduced. Being an axiom, it cannot be proved. If it could be proved, it would not be the starting point. Why do we have to keep repeating the obvious for the benefit of the Van Tilians?

In Part Five we read about "Van Til as Critic." Here the author studies "Van Til's offensive apologetics, his critical analysis of unbelieving systems and of the influence of unbelief upon Christian theology" (51). Writes Frame: "Van Til is at his worst in his critiques of other thinkers, but even here he provides valuable insight" (399). In this section, which will not be analyzed by this reviewer, we have Van Til's interaction with "Greek Philosophy and Scholasticism," Immanuel Kant and Karl Barth, and Herman Dooyeweerd. Suffice it to say, in Frame's own words, here Van Til "does point out some genuine and serious errors and confusions in those systems, and even more in the system of Karl Barth. For giving the church such clear warning about these errors, he deserves the commendation of all Christians" (400).

Finally, in Part Six we come to "Conclusions." Chapter 28 is an interesting study of "Van Til's Successors," which includes his immediate successors, the Theonomists, as well as some others. Then in chapter 29, "Van Til and Our Future," the author gives us a summary of his conclusions. He is critical in some areas, but supportive in most. "I believe, therefore," says the author, "that we can learn much that is good and valuable from Van Til without being slavish devotees. It is not necessary for the Van Tilian movement to maintain a movement mentality. Nor is it necessary to stand in stark antithesis against all our fellow Christians who have thus far not joined that movement" (400).

Conclusion

Among other things, Professor Frame has concluded that Van Til "is perhaps the most important Christian thinker since Calvin." He is not alone with such a superlative statement. Van Til has been called "undoubtedly the greatest defender of the Christian faith in our century." It has been said that "in every area of thought, the philosophy of

Cornelius Van Til is of critical and central importance." Other of his admirers say that Van Til "is a legendary giant," "of unquestioned orthodoxy."¹¹

But, as we have seen, these comments are unwarranted. It turns out that a great deal of Van Til's teaching is far from "unquestioned orthodoxy." It does not pass the Berean test of *Acts* 17:11. Worse, much of Van Til's thought is not only errant, but dangerously so. Robbins has said it well: "Let us turn from Van Tilianism and 'embrace with passion' the Scriptural ideals of clarity in both thought and speech; let us recognize, with Christ and the Westminster Assembly, the indispensability of logic; let us believe and teach, with Augustine and Athanasius, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity; and let us defend the consistency and intelligibility of the Bible. Then, and only then, will Christianity have a bright and glorious future in America and throughout the Earth."¹²

¹¹ Cited in Robbins, *Van Til*, 1, 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.