

**Van Til and the Trinity:
The Centrality of the Christian View of God in the Apologetics of
Cornelius Van Til**

By
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Introduction

Beginning with the publication of his book The Defense of the Faith in 1955, until his death in 1987, Cornelius Van Til set forth an apologetic system for which his name has since become synonymous. This system, known as “Presuppositional Apologetics,” or the “Transcendental Method,”¹ emphasizes the fundamental antithesis between God as Creator and man as creature, and between believer and unbeliever, and seeks to use that antithesis to show unregenerate men their need of the gospel.

One of the principles that Van Til emphasized was the need to defend more than just mere theism, but Christian theism:

Naturally in the system of theology and in apologetics the doctrine of God is of fundamental importance. We must first ask what kind of a God Christianity believes in before we can really ask with intelligence whether such a God exists. The *what* precedes the *that*; the connotation precedes the denotation; at least the latter cannot be discussed intelligently without at once considering the former.²

Christianity for Van Til is not a series of disparate doctrines to be defended, such that one’s defence of the resurrection of Christ, for example, has little to do with one’s view of the sovereignty of God. Van Til, rather, saw Christianity as a system of thought that must be advanced as a whole, and must be defended as a whole. Hence, for Van Til, one’s doctrine of God is not a peripheral issue with regard to apologetics; rather it is critical to the whole system of Christian thought.

It has appeared that in the Christian doctrine of the self-contained ontological Trinity we have the foundation concept of a Christian theory of being, of knowledge and of action. Christians are interested in showing to those who believe in *no* God or in *a* God, *a* beyond, *some* ultimate or absolute, that it is *this* God in whom they must believe lest all meaning should disappear from human words... It is their conviction that the actuality of the existence of *this* God is the presupposition of all possible predication.³

¹ Van Til himself only occasionally referred to his apologetic as “Presuppositional” in light of the fact that this had become its popular appellation. He preferred the designation “Transcendental,” though this is borrowed from Immanuel Kant, a philosopher of whom Van Til was critical.

² Cornelius Van Til, The Defense of the Faith 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, Nj: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), p. 9.

In order to grasp fully the importance of the Trinity to Van Til's apologetic, it is necessary first to understand his apologetic approach as a whole. From there, this paper will then present Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity, showing how it fits with his overall defense of the Christian faith.

A Summary of Van Til's Apologetic

Most popular apologetic methods seek to prove the truth of Christianity by appeal to common standards of logic, reason, and evidence. The apologist starts with these standards and then tests the claims of Christian belief against them to demonstrate their veracity. Van Til objected strongly to this approach, claiming that it is unbiblical, and violates the biblical doctrines of God's supremacy and authority. For Van Til, to say that God's truth must be submitted to some standard outside of Himself is to place God under the authority of something other than Himself. This then places God in submission to logic, reason, and evidence, rather than God being over all things.

Moreover, who decides the correct use of reason, logic, or evidence? Many would deny God the right to decide for fear of being accused of "circular reasoning" (i.e., assuming one's conclusion before it has been proven: "God's Word says that God exists, therefore God exists."), and hence appeal to reason, logic, and evidence as "commonly understood" among men. It is assumed that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, have a common understanding of logic, reason, and evidence, and so when using these to demonstrate the truths of the Christian faith, no-one can question the legitimacy of the claims, since the same principles that are being applied to the evidences for Christian truth are applied by all men to every other kind of evidence.

Van Til's concern at this point is the fact that not only are logic, reason, and evidence being treated as standards apart from God to which God's truth must conform to be accepted as true, but man, and not God, is being set up as judge of God's truth, and, in fact, *all* truth. While the popular apologist would appeal to this as the "common ground" from which the Christian can make his case to unbelievers that they may consider the

³ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, Nj: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1976), p. 13.

claims of Christianity, Van Til sees this as a deadly compromise of Scriptural truth, and a fatal concession to the world's view of man as "the measure of all things."⁴

Van Til argued that apologetics does not operate in a vacuum apart from theology as a whole. One's view of God, man, and salvation in particular, will affect one's apologetic approach. From this view, it is not simply aspects of the Christian faith that one is defending when engaged in apologetic dialog, but it is the Christian faith, or the entire system of Christian thought that one is presenting.

The Christian⁵ doctrine of man, drawn mainly from Genesis chapters 1 through 3, and Romans 1, says that man is a creature of God, created in God's image, and given dominion over the earth. God set man in the midst of His creation, gave him authority to name the various life forms around him (a symbol of their subjection to man), and to enjoy the company of the Lord, the spouse the Lord created for man, and his environment, with the only exception being to refrain from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

In this picture of pre-Fall Paradise, Van Til sees man as the recipient both of "natural revelation" and "special revelation." Natural revelation is the revelation of God's existence from the natural environment God created for man. In the Garden of Eden, the splendor of the garden and the provision of God for him in that place served as natural revelation to man of God's existence and grace to His creation. Special revelation is God revealing Himself to man in a more direct way, in this case through the ability granted to man such that he may understand the world and the various "facts" of the world as God wanted him to understand them, and in the impartation of divine liberties

⁴ A quotation from the Greek philosopher Protagoras (*πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν*. "Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are as they are, and of things that are not as they are not."). This phrase is quoted elsewhere, notably in Plato's *Theaetetus*, section 152a (see <http://www.perseus.org/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0172&layout=&loc=Theat.+152a>), and is understood to be an early statement of relativistic philosophy. Plato certainly seemed to understand it that way.

⁵ By "Christian," the reader should understand the *Reformed* Christian perspective. While Van Til recognized those coming from an Arminian viewpoint as fellow believers, he did not consider their apologetic (nor their theology, for that matter) to be consistently Christian. Since this author shares Van Til's conviction at this point, he will continue to use the term "Christian" in this way without further qualification.

("From any tree you may eat freely...", Genesis 2:16) and prohibitions ("... but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...", Genesis 2:17).

Genesis 3 relates man's disobedience to God's command and subsequent expulsion from the Garden. It is as a result of this that sin came into the world (Romans 5:12-14), and Van Til relates this to the fact that now all men are suppressing the knowledge of God within them. He points to the fact that Romans 1:18-32 teaches that all men know God, but deny that knowledge in an act of willful suppression, such that they live and act as if they do not know God.⁶ Man no longer lives in the light of special revelation, but according to his own understanding. Unaided by the divine insight available to him through God's Word and the regenerating work of the Spirit in his heart, he is unable to properly interpret the facts around him. The extent to which man is able to understand anything in the world correctly is due solely to the grace of God not permitting man to live *consistently* by his self-imposed ignorance. In other words, it is the fact that man lives *inconsistently*, that he denies God, and yet lives according to the principles of logic, reason, and evidence that God established, that enables him to function from day to day and make any kind of sense out of life. However, because man is using knowledge that is given by the Creator apart from a knowledge of the Creator, his knowledge will ultimately lead to misguided (at best), or wrong (at worst) conclusions. He will form out of the truth presented to him the conclusions that his presuppositions have already determined.

Van Til used the illustration of a buzz-saw to describe this concept: Accordingly every one of fallen man's functions operates wrongly. The set of the whole human personality has changed. The intellect of fallen man may, as such, be keen enough. It can therefore formally understand the Christian position. It may be compared to a buzz-saw that is sharp and shining, ready to cut the boards that comes to it. Let us say that a carpenter wishes to cut fifty boards for the purpose of laying the floor of a house. He has marked his boards. He has set his saw. He begins at one end of the mark on the board. But he does not know that his seven-year-old son has tampered with the saw and changed its set. The result

⁶ The subject of self-deception as it applies to presuppositional apologetics was the subject of Greg Bahnsen's doctoral dissertation. Bahnsen, a student of Van Til, later published this work (or at least a paper based on this work). See Greg Bahnsen, "The Crucial Concept of Self-Deception in Presuppositional Apologetics," in *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 52 (1995), pp. 1-31, reproduced online at <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pa207.htm>.

is that every board he saws is cut slantwise and thus unusable because too short except at the point where the saw first made its contact with the wood. As long as the set of the saw is not changed the result will always be the same. So also whenever the teachings of Christianity are presented to the natural man, they will be cut according to the set of sinful human personality. The keener the intellect, the more consistently will the truths of Christianity be cut according to an exclusively immanentistic pattern. The result is that however they may formally understand the truth of Christianity, men still worship “the dream and figment of their own heart” [John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book I, 4:1]. They have what Hodge calls “mere cognition,” but no true knowledge of God.⁷

The presuppositional approach to apologetic, therefore, differs from the traditional approach to apologetics in the following ways:

1. It does not assume that the unbeliever and the believer have common ground to stand on philosophically. They cannot appeal to “common” reason, “common” logic, “common” facts, apart from presuppositions, because one’s presuppositions will always determine how those facts are to be interpreted. The Christian is able to utilize God’s revelation in Scripture to come to correct conclusions; the unbeliever, as mentally skilled and intelligent as he might be, is unable to arrive at the same conclusions due to the effects of sin.⁸ There is, therefore, no “common ground” for them to stand upon. This is a fundamental difference, because it influences the way the apologist handles not only philosophical argumentation, but also the use of evidence. Van Til points out that the apologist may present compelling evidence for the truth of the resurrection of Christ to an unbeliever, but unless the unbeliever is willing to accept the Christian presuppositions that both allow for such miraculous events, and enable him to interpret the events correctly, he will see it as merely “something strange” that happened to someone a long time ago, with little or no meaning or relevance to anyone else.
2. Unlike many traditional apologetic methods, Van Til’s fully appreciates the fact, noted previously from Romans 1:18 ff., that man has a knowledge of God that he is actively suppressing. The presuppositional apologist will, therefore, make an

⁷ Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, p. 74. Also found in Van Til, Christian Apologetics, p. 43.

⁸ Van Til, agreeing with Calvin, insists that man’s inability to reason correctly is not a fault of his intellect, but a result of sin. Man’s problem is not intellectual, it is ethical. See Van Til, The Defense of the Faith, pp. 158-9.

appeal to this knowledge of God in calling the unbeliever to recognize the fact that he is a fallen creature, and he has an obligation to his Creator not only to acknowledge His existence, but to give Him due worship and obedience. The only way he can do this is through Christ, through whom his sins can be forgiven, and his heart changed. It is this heart change wrought by the Holy Spirit, not clever argumentation, which will ultimately enable the unbeliever to set aside his old worldview and adopt the Christian worldview.

3. Often, traditional apologetic methods seek to demonstrate only that of all the philosophical and theological options available to men, Christianity is the one most likely to be true, and hence should be accepted on that basis. Van Til argued that there is “certain proof”⁹ for the truth of Christianity. It is not simply one of many possibilities, nor is it just the most probable; it is the only viable option, and this can be demonstrated with certainty.¹⁰ Van Til’s concern was that if one presents the existence of God as simply very probable, one allows the unbeliever the possibility, no matter how slim, that God might not exist.¹¹ In other words, in arguing for the possible existence of God, the apologist indirectly also argues for the possibility of God’s non-existence. In reality, this is not an option; the unbeliever is wrong to think this, and the Christian is doing him a disservice by giving him any room to entertain such a notion. Also, to say that God’s revelation is only possibly true is for Van Til a denial of the clarity of that revelation.¹²

⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 103; *Christian Apologetics*, p. 64.

¹⁰ “Faith is not blind... Christianity can be shown to be, not ‘just as good as’ or even ‘better than’ the non-Christian position, but the *only* position that does not make nonsense out of human experience.” Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia, Pa: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), pp. 33, 19, quoted in Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, Nj: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1998), p. 75.

¹¹ “Van Til’s critique of probabilism is legitimate up to a point. Some apologists... have claimed that the evidence for Christianity is only probable, and that the unbeliever is therefore right, up to a point, to have doubts about it. Van Til is correct to insist that we should not give the non-Christian such a justification for his unbelief.” John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, Nj: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1995), p. 279.

¹² “It is an insult to the living God to say that his revelation of himself so lacks in clarity that man, himself through and through revelation of God, does justice by it when he says that God *probably* exists.” (Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 197.)

Romans 1:18 teaches that God has revealed Himself in such a way that men are without excuse. No man can stand before God on the Day of Judgment and say that God had not made Himself known clearly enough. Both the external witness of creation and the internal witness of the knowledge of God (albeit actively suppressed by unregenerate man) testify to God's existence. To deny that there is overwhelming evidence of this fact is, for Van Til, to deny that God has spoken clearly enough for man to be fully culpable.

4. The traditional apologetic method appeals directly to evidences, facts, and so forth that the apologist considers "neutral" in order to demonstrate the truth of Christian claims. Van Til argued that it is more appropriate to argue *indirectly*, by appeal to the underlying presuppositions that make those facts and evidences understandable:

5.

The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the "facts" and "laws" intelligible. The question is as to what the "facts" and "laws" really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes that they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?¹³

For Van Til, this question can only be answered indirectly, by the Christian apologist placing himself "in the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake,"¹⁴ and then having the non-Christian "place himself upon the Christian position for argument's sake."¹⁵ The former can then be shown to be unintelligible, and the latter to be intelligible, in the one case answering "the fool according to his folly" (Proverbs 26:5), and then answering "not a fool according to his folly" (Proverbs 26:4).

¹³ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, p. 62.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

6. Again, it is not the intention of the presuppositional apologist to simply present evidence for the resurrection of Christ, or evidence for the existence of a Supreme being. The presuppositional apologist presents an argument for the truth of the entire Christian worldview: not simply the resurrection of Christ, for example, but the resurrection of Christ as interpreted through the authoritative Word of the only triune God, showing why Christ's death and resurrection was necessary for the salvation of souls.¹⁶

Van Til and the Trinity

The above description of Van Til's apologetic approach is a very brief sketch. His own works go into much more detail, as do the works of his successors and former students, notably Greg Bahnsen and John Frame; the reader is directed to these resources for further discussion of many of the aspects of Van Til's method beyond the scope of this paper.

It is necessary now, however, to turn to the place of the Trinity within presuppositional apologetics. As indicated by the quotations cited earlier, Van Til regarded Christian theism as the only theism worth defending. To him, Christian apologetics is not simply about arguing for the existence of a god, but of the Trinitarian God set forth in Scripture.

In his An Introduction to Systematic Theology, Van Til makes the following statement:

... It is sometimes asserted that we can prove to men that we are not asserting anything that they ought to consider irrational, inasmuch as we say that God is one in essence and three in person. We therefore claim that we havenot asserted unity and trinity of exactly the same thing.

¹⁶ John Frame, a former student of Van Til, and an advocate of his apologetic system, notes that it might seem a little overwhelming to suggest that one needs to incorporate the entire scope of Christian theology into one's apologetic presentation. In real life, one would not present the Christian worldview in this way, but these points would be brought up in the course of dialog. Indeed, he cites examples from Van Til where even he, in his more reflective and pragmatic moments, realizes that one has to adapt one's apologetic presentation to fit the needs of the situation, and the background and abilities of the one to whom the gospel is being presented. See Frame, pp. 300-1, 315-7. For a good example of Van Til's apologetic presented in this "user-friendly" manner, see his pamphlet "Why I Believe in God," quoted in its entirety in Bahnsen, pp. 121-143.

Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.¹⁷

The assertion that “the whole Godhead is one person” naturally caused quite a stir that continues to linger to this day. Gordon Clark called the statement a “departure from the faith of the universal church,”¹⁸ and John Robbins referred to it as “a radically new heresy.”¹⁹ At face value this assessment appears to be correct, since the orthodox formulation of the Trinity states that God is one being consisting of three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, not one person consisting of three persons, which appears to be a contradiction. To understand what Van Til meant by this, however, requires more than just a superficial reading of the statement. It requires that we dig a little deeper into how Van Til understood the Trinity, and particularly how the Trinity functioned within the context of his apologetic method.

Van Til and Orthodox Trinitarian Doctrine

At many points in his writing, Van Til demonstrates his thinking to be in line with all the major creeds and confessions concerning the doctrine of the Trinity:

We hold that God exists as a tri-personality... The three persons of the trinity are co-substantial; not one is derived in his substance from either or both of the others. Yet there are three distinct persons in this unity; the diversity and the identity are equally underived.²⁰

As independent and unchangeable God has unity within himself. We distinguish here between the unity of singularity... and the unity of simplicity... The unity of singularity has reference to numerical oneness. There is and can be only one God.

¹⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, Pa: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974), p. 229, cited in Frame, p. 65.

¹⁸ Gordon H. Clark, “The Trinity,” in *The Trinity Review* (November 1979). This article can be found online at <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=9>.

¹⁹ Frame, p. 66. See also an article entitled “Van Til, Logic, and the Trinity” (http://www.christiantreasury.org/doctrine/Van_Til_Trinity.htm) in which the author (unnamed) asserts that Van Til’s “heretical assertion violates scripture, logic, and Christian creedal statements.”

²⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 12.

The unity of simplicity signifies that God is in no sense composed of parts or aspects that existed prior to himself.²¹

With respect to the ontological Trinity I try to follow Calvin in stressing that there is no subordination of essence as between the three persons. As Warfield points out when speaking of Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity "... the Father, the Son, the Spirit is each this one God, the entire divine essence being in each"; (Calvin and Calvinism, p. 232).²²

God exists in himself as a triune self-consciously active being. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are each a personality and together constitute the exhaustively personal God... Each is as much God as are the other two.²³

John Frame also maintains that Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity "begins with an affirmation of the ancient creeds and the Reformed confessions."²⁴ He further speaks of how in his Introduction to Systematic Theology, Van Til lists biblical texts, and sketches the development of the doctrine.

In this historical survey, he emphasizes, as have Reformed theologians generally, (1) that the Trinity is ontological, not merely economic—God is both three and one in his very nature, not only in his relations to the world—and (2) that it is erroneous to assert relations of subordination (as, for example, of the Son to the Father).²⁵

If Van Til's doctrine of the Trinity is, at its foundation, in agreement with Scripture and the historical creeds and confessions of the Christian faith, what did he mean by saying that God is both "three persons and one person"? This is the appropriate question to ask: instead of accusing Van Til of contradiction, or of unorthodoxy, one needs to understand what he meant by the terms he uses. As Frame correctly points out, it is not a logical contradiction to say that God is three persons, and God is one person, if

²¹ Van Til, Christian Apologetics, p. 5,

²² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁴ Frame, p. 63.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

the word “person” is being used in different ways. While such equivocation is not to be encouraged, especially in theological discourse, it is legitimate, as long as the different meanings are made clear.²⁶ Certainly, Van Til is not the easiest of philosophers or theologians to read, and his thoughts are not always most lucidly expressed, especially for those not well versed in philosophical terms.²⁷ However, they are not so far beyond understanding that a little effort can not reap rewards.

The issue that Van Til was addressing was not so much to do with the nature of the being of God, but whether God Himself is personal. In other words, is the being of God a person? Christians recognize that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each persons in the truest sense of the word, but when Christians speak of God, are they still referring to a personal being, or can God only be spoken of as personal in relation to each member of the Trinity?

Van Til’s answer to this is yes: the being of God is as much a personal being as each person of the Trinity of which He consists. The divine essence is not just an impersonal abstraction. Scripture often speaks of God behaving in such a way as to indicate full personality, particularly in the Old Testament, where there are very few explicit references to God as a triune being.²⁸ While one may consider such passages to be just short-hand for speaking of one (or all) of the persons of the Trinity, it must still be said that God in those passages is ultimate personality.

Frame illustrates this discussion with the example of a dog.²⁹ When one speaks of the essence of the dog, one can refer to the dog’s “doghood.” However, you cannot tie a leash to “doghood” and take it for a walk: it is an impersonal abstraction. The question is then whether God is a similar kind of abstraction for the Trinity, and Van Til’s answer is

²⁶ Frame, pp. 68-9.

²⁷ See Frame’s comments, *ibid.*, pp. 31-32. For example, “His books and syllabi contain some of the same problems: bold, exciting summaries, illustrations, and exhortation, but often inadequate definition, analysis, and argument. . . The profundity is there, but the reader must exercise some effort and some patience to understand it.”

²⁸ For example, Exodus 3:15-18, where God reveals Himself to Moses as “I AM,” and commands him to go to His people and free them. Both the statement and the command indicate that God has a name for Himself, and has a will to be accomplished. This is just one of innumerable examples.

²⁹ Frame, p. 67.

no. God is as ultimately personal as each person of the Trinity. In this sense, God is both one person (i.e., a personal being), and three persons (i.e., three separate persons within the one being that is God).

The above discussion introduces some important topics related to the Trinity, namely how the Trinity enables God to be ultimately personal, and how the universe God created can truly only be understood, and have meaning, by virtue of being made by a triune God.

Correlativism, Personality, and God's Aseity

The term “correlative” refers to two things which have a mutual dependency, like trees and people, a store and its customers, or a husband and his wife. In each of these pairs, both have something the other needs. While recognizing such correlativism in the world, Van Til teaches that God has no such relationship with anything within His creation³⁰; while the whole of creation, including man, is dependent upon God every moment for existence, God has no need of His creation. God's existence does not depend upon anything He has made, and the same is true for any of God's actions or attributes. God's love, grace, mercy, and justice do not require anything outside of Himself to be realities. For man especially, this is certainly not the case. Man cannot exist without God's sustaining grace, and man only knows love, justice, grace, mercy, and so forth as they are given to Him by God by virtue of being made in His image, and as these are expressed from man to something outside of himself (for example, love between a husband and wife, mercy or justice between the offender and the one wronged).

The only sense in which correlativity applies to God is within the Trinity. It might be asked how God can possibly know love, for example, without there being an object of love, thus arguing for mutual dependence between God and his creation. Some might reason from this that God needed to create the universe (and mankind in particular) because of the necessity for His love to be expressed. However, since Christian theism holds that the being of God consists of three separate persons, God is able to express love within Himself—between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—thus maintaining His

³⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 182.

independence from His creation, or His aseity, while truly experiencing and expressing love.

In this way, Christian theism, and Christian theism alone, answers the question how God can truly know and express love and yet be utterly separate from His creation. It is the fact of the Trinity that makes God more than just an impersonal force.

Further, as mentioned, the fact that humans are able to love, show mercy, reason, and so forth, is by virtue of the fact that these attributes of God have been passed to him, which is what it means to be created in God's image.

Man is created *in God's image*. He is therefore like God in everything in which a creature can be like God. He is like God in that he too is a personality. This is what we mean when we speak of the image of God in the wider or more general sense. Then when we wish to emphasize the fact that man resembles God especially in the splendour of his moral attributes we say that when man was created he had true knowledge, true righteousness and true holiness... We call this the image of God in the narrower sense.³¹

In the Fall, man failed to live according to the true knowledge God had given to him and decided to seek true knowledge outside of God. He failed to acknowledge his creaturliness, and hence the finitude of his attributes compared to God. Being finite is not, in itself, a sin; however man compounded the sin of disobedience with the fact that he equated finitude with sin and blamed his circumstance for his sinfulness.³² So, while the sin of the Fall was expressed in man's rebellion to the command of God, behind this rebellion was man's attempt to do without God: to interpret reality in his own terms without reference to the knowledge of God within him. It is because of this sin that man continues to suppress the knowledge of God, and only regeneration can reverse this effect of sin.

It is clear, therefore, that, since God has all the attributes of personality, He is personal. Moreover, since God does not depend upon anyone or anything else for those attributes, one can say that God is *absolutely* personal.

³¹ Ibid., p. 13.

³² Ibid., p. 15.

In the Trinity there is completely personal relationship without residue. And for that reason it may be said that all man's actions are personal too. Man's surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God.³³

This is an important point, because the very existence of logic, reason, and meaning in the universe hangs on it being the creation of an absolutely personal God. Only a personal God could sovereignly create and plan all things. Impersonal forces cannot make decisions, and therefore cannot plan, have no purpose, and can give no meaning to things. Further, if God is not sovereign, then He and His purposes are subject to impersonal forces, or chance. He becomes relative to His creation—an extension of the created order, known only in terms of creation, because it is unable to define itself.³⁴

Since God derives His personality from the fact that He is Trinity, it follows that only the God of Christian theism can be understood as the Creator of all things. It is only as man understands the world through the revelation of the triune God in nature and Scripture that he can achieve any kind of true understanding.³⁵

The “One-and-the-Many” Problem³⁶

Van Til believed that the Trinity held the key to the answer to the classic “one-and-the-many” philosophical problem. Briefly stated, this problem relates to the search for true knowledge of anything, whether that knowledge can be found by abstraction, or by analysis. Abstraction would take something, for example one's pet cat, and look at it in terms of the broader category of felines, and then in terms of mammals, of animals,

³³ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia, Pa: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 78-79, quoted in Frame, p. 59.

³⁴ Frame, p. 64.

³⁵ Frame believes that the Christian apologist should make much more use of the issue of personalism versus impersonalism since it is such a distinctive feature of Christianity. The fact that Christianity presents a universe not controlled by impersonal chance, that it shows the source of ultimate friendship and love, assures that there is ultimate rationality, and also that there is an ultimate justice in the world, all make for a powerful apologetic. See Frame, p. 61.

³⁶ What follows is based upon Frame's explanation, in a much abbreviated and simplified form. See Frame, pp. 71-76.

and so on. Certainly, information can be gained in this way, but does one truly know one's pet cat? Conversely, one can go the other way and analyze the cat in terms of its constituent parts, its fur and eye color, its mannerisms, and so forth. But again, do these fragments of information constitute knowledge of the cat? These are all sensory impressions that together form an experience of the cat, but these impressions are, again, just abstractions.

So, either way, one ends up with an abstraction: either abstract unity, or abstract particularity, and neither provide true knowledge. Both are ultimately meaningless, which is why, in Van Til's view, non-Christian worldviews are ultimately meaningless, because they represent man's search for a standard of truth apart from God. And since neither abstract unity nor abstract particularity are personal, neither carry with them an obligation to believe, and cannot, therefore, be a criterion of truth.

Van Til believed the solution to the "one-and-the-many" problem lies with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity:

The ontological trinity will be our interpretative concept everywhere. God is our concrete universal;... in Him the problem of knowledge is solved. If we begin thus with the ontological trinity as our concrete universal, we frankly differ from every school of philosophy... not merely in our conclusions, but in our starting-point and in our method as well. For us the facts are what they are, and the universals are what they are, because of their common dependence upon the ontological trinity. Thus, as earlier discussed, the facts are correlative to the universals.³⁷

In the Trinity, all abstract particulars are related to the one universal, and the universal is expressed in terms of particulars. Since God is one being expressed in three persons, it is quite natural for Him to be able to have knowledge of things in terms of their particulars, relate the particulars together, and also see them in terms of the universal. In God, "unity... is no more fundamental than diversity, and diversity... is no

³⁷ Van Til, Common Grace (Philadelphia, Pa: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1947), p. 64, cited in Bahnsen, p. 240.

more fundamental than unity.”³⁸ The ontological Trinity³⁹ consists of three persons who are equal in every sense: they are ontologically both one and many.

Since the triune God is the author of creation, it follows that the temporal sense of “one and many,” that is, the unity and diversity observable in the universe, finds its resolution in Him. As their Creator, all aspects of reality have an order in the universe, whether equal with one another, or superior, or inferior, according to the manner God has organized them.

All aspects being equally created, no one aspect of reality may be regarded as more ultimate than another. Thus the created *one and many* may in this respect be said to be *equal* to one another; they are equally derived and equally dependent upon God who sustains them both. The particulars or facts of the universe do and must act in accord with universals or laws. Thus there is order in the created universe. On the other hand, the laws may not and can never reduce the particulars to abstract particulars or reduce their individuality in any manner.⁴⁰

Van Til goes on to point out that the laws established by God wherein all the particulars function and find meaning are but generalizations, and God may at any time take any particular fact and place it in a new context with regard to created law. This is what is commonly referred to as a “miracle.” Notice, however, that miracles are not random disruptions to the regular laws of the universe; they are the result of a reordering of particulars by the triune, personal God, with a particular purpose in mind. For this reason, the resurrection of Christ is not just some peculiar event that, on the balance of things, must be statistically possible in a random universe. It is the result of the plan and purpose of a sovereign God in whom alone particulars and universals, “the one and the many,” find their ultimate source.

³⁸ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 25.

³⁹ When speaking of the Trinity, theologians commonly distinguish between the “ontological” and the “economic” Trinity. The former refers to the being of the Trinity, or the relationship between the three persons in their essence, who they are. The latter refers to the way the Trinity is organized, in a functional sense. There is complete equality within the ontological Trinity, and yet there is clearly an ordering of roles within the economic Trinity, with the Son taking the position of submission to the Father, for example.

⁴⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, p. 27.

Rationalism/Irrationalism

Van Til believed that all non-Christian thought boiled down to either rationalism, or irrationalism, or some kind of vacillation between the two. When men do not think God's thoughts after Him, they end up either denying any form of ultimacy in the universe, giving it all up to chance and mystery, or they end up assuming the mantle of authoritative interpreter and seek to understand the universe in terms of their own reason and experience. The former is what Van Til refers to as irrationalism, the latter, rationalism.

This is often not an "either-or" proposition, since, as Van Til points out, even the most irrational intentions of the minds of men assume some form of rationalism:

Strange as it may seem at first sight, the irrationalism of the idea of pure contingency requires for its correlative the rationalism of the most absolute determinism. The idea of pure contingency requires the rejection of the Christian doctrine of creation and providence as logically impossible. Thus the statement that *anything* may happen must be qualified by adding that anything but Christianity is possible. Theoretically speaking, any hypothesis is relevant, but practically speaking, the Christian "hypothesis" is excluded at the outset of any investigation. Men will follow the facts wherever they may lead so long as they do not lead to the truth of Christianity.⁴¹

In the previous discussion on the "one and the many" problem, the point was made that man either seeks to find some kind of absolute, either by abstraction or by analysis, but neither are really possible, since neither are personal and can not, therefore, demand belief, or really say anything about that particular aspect of reality. The abstract knows nothing of the particulars, and the particulars know nothing of the abstract. Man's appeal to irrationalism and to rationalism echoes the same striving after ultimate truth: the irrational looking to the abstract principle, or the "brute," (that is, uninterpreted either by man or by God) fact, the rational to the abstract particular.

Van Til sees both rationality and irrationality at play in the Garden of Eden. By calling into question the fact that God had spoken authoritatively, and concluding that the results of eating from the forbidden tree were far from certain, man exercised

⁴¹ Van Til, *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (London, UK: Tyndale Press, 1950; reprint, Phillipsburg, Nj: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, 1953), p. 16, quoted in Bahnsen, pp. 389-90.

irrationality. However, by then assuming the ability to reason within himself regarding what God may or may not do, rejecting the authority of God and taking that authority for himself, man exercised rationality.

It has been intimated that fallen man is both irrationalist and rationalist, and at the same time. His irrationalism rests upon his metaphysical assumption that reality is controlled by or is an expression of pure Chance. His rationalism is based upon the assumption that reality is wholly determined by laws with which his thought is ultimately identical.⁴²

While the Christian may accuse the non-Christian of rationalism and irrationalism, the non-Christian tries to level the same charge against the Christian. From the non-Christian's perspective the idea of God as self-contained, knowing both Himself and His creation absolutely and completely, controlling all things by His sovereign will is rationalism. He would also consider the idea that man is subject to God, and man is not at liberty to put God "in the dock," to analyze and pass judgment on His thoughts, to be irrationalism.⁴³

What is clear is that the Christian and non-Christian ideas stand diametrically opposed to one another. The non-Christian view of irrationality, that posits a universe where all is arbitrary, stands against the Christian view of rationality, where God is firmly in control of all things. The non-Christian view of rationality, where man is able to know and control all things according to the laws he has discerned by his own reason apart from God is opposed to the Christian view of irrationality that has God's thoughts overruling those of man, and God's revelation as necessary for man to know anything truly.

The apologetic value in this clash of worldviews lies in the fact that, if the apologist assumes the non-Christian position and applies it to any fact of the universe, he can demonstrate that it does not make sense of that fact. Only the Christian views of rationality ("continuity") and irrationality ("discontinuity") ultimately make sense of the

⁴² Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, cited without precise page numbers by Bahnsen, p. 399.

⁴³ Ibid.

universe. The reason for this is same reason that the problem of “the one and the many” could only be resolved from a Christian worldview: only the ultimately personal, triune God of the Scriptures can create with order and purpose, and can exercise sovereign control according to His exhaustive will.

Conclusion

It seems clear to this writer that Van Til’s doctrine of the Trinity was not only fundamentally orthodox, but also a key aspect of his overall apologetic method. It is on account of the Trinity that God is truly personal, and not an abstract force. Such a force would have no will or purpose, and would therefore be contingent upon the created order. In such a scenario, chance would rule, there would be no order and predictability to the universe, and man would have no ultimate standard of rationality, ethics, or anything else.

Since God is ultimately personal, He rules His creation with sovereign will and purpose, but also with justice, grace, mercy, and love. Further, by analogy, His creation partakes of these things, such that, for example, the human intellect, will, and emotions relate to one another with the same kind of equal ultimacy found in the ontological Trinity, and yet there is also a subordination of the will and emotions to the intellect, as there is a subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father in the economic Trinity.⁴⁴

The apologetic power of Van Til’s argument lies in the fact that, as with his approach as a whole, it strikes at the root of the unbeliever’s sin—autonomy—and exposes the fallacies of his reasoning apart from God. Aside from Christian theism, man cannot see order, structure, and purpose in the universe. Insofar as he recognizes these things, he is not doing so from his own presuppositions, but borrowing from the Christian worldview. His reasoning is both rational and irrational; he sees diversity and he sees unity; he experiences and expresses love, mercy, and justice; and yet his own worldview can not make sense of these things. Only in Christian theism can these things be rightly understood:

⁴⁴ Frame, p. 144.

Looking about me I see both order and disorder in every dimension of life. But I look at both of them in the light of the Great Orderer who is back of them. I need not deny either of them in the interest of optimism or in the interest of pessimism. I see the strong men of biology searching diligently through hill and dale to prove that the creation doctrine is not true with respect to the human body, only to return and admit that the missing link is missing still... I see the strong men of logic and scientific methodology search deep into the transcendental for a validity that will not be swept away by the ever-changing tide of the wholly new, only to return and say that they can find no bridge from logic to reality, or from reality to logic. And yet I find all these, though standing on their heads, reporting much that is true. I need only turn their reports right side up, making God instead of man the center of it all, and I have a marvelous display of the facts as God has intended me to see them.⁴⁵

In the concluding comments of his book, Frame makes the point that those who hold to Van Til's apologetic should spend less time discussing methodology, and more time developing arguments.⁴⁶ It is the hope of this author that even within the limited scope of this paper, and, of necessity, the bare treatment that he has made of the subjects touched upon here, the reader will see the great potential within Van Til's perspective to apply it to the numerous areas of non-Christian belief that exist today. While the distinction he makes between believing and unbelieving worldviews opens many avenues for apologetic argument against atheists and agnostics of all stripes,⁴⁷ Van Til's insistence that Christian theism, as opposed to simple theism, must be presented challenges the apologist to craft arguments against other theistic belief systems (Islam, Mormonism, Hinduism, etc.). To that end in particular, the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity to Van Til's system is of critical importance.

⁴⁵ Van Til, *Why I Believe in God*, cited without original page numbering in Bahnsen, p. 141.

⁴⁶ Frame, p. 400.

⁴⁷ A classic example being Dr. Greg Bahnsen's debate against the atheist Dr. Gordon Stein in 1985, available from <http://www.cmfnow.com>.