

IN RESPONSE - AN APOLOGETIC APPRAISAL, PART TWO

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We are at the place of discussing the point of contact we have with fallen men and women in our evangelism and in our apologetics. I therefore continue with the section where we concluded our discussion in the last issue of *In Response*.

A. Van Til's Point of Contact

Van Til flatly rejects there is any common ground between the believer and the unbeliever. The unbeliever holds to a position of autonomy based upon his rejection of God. The unbeliever views himself as the ultimate interpreter of reality. Van Til maintains an assumption of any common ground between the believer and the unbeliever is a compromise with his apostate pattern of thought. Van Til therefore says,

Disagreeing with the natural man's interpretation of himself as the ultimate reference point, the Reformed apologist must seek his point of contact with the natural man in that which is beneath the threshold of his working consciousness, in the sense of deity which he seeks to suppress. And to do this the Reformed apologist must also seek a point of contact with the systems constructed by the natural man.¹

Van Til is taking a self-conscious step away from Scottish and American Presbyterianism as exemplified in Old Princeton and he is taking a step toward continental thought as exemplified in Abraham Kuyper. Commenting on Calvin, Abraham Kuyper had this to say,

Calvin called this seed of religion (*semen religionis*), by which he indicated that this innate knowledge of God is an ineradicable property of human nature, a spiritual eye in us, the lens of which may be dimmed, but always so that the lens, and consequently the eye remains.²

Van Til did determine to build on Kuyper's idea of innate knowledge. In a discussion of "Amsterdam and Old Princeton," Van Til says forthrightly, "I

have chosen the position of Abraham Kuyper."³ It is only logical for him to say as quoted above that "the Reformed apologist must seek his point of contact with the natural man in that which is beneath the threshold of his working consciousness." The point of contact for Van Til is deep within, "beneath the threshold of his working consciousness." I emphasize this quote because it seems to me to be telling.

Here we have the answer to why Van Til seems to gloss over the image of God in the broad sense. In fact, I think he *avoids* mentioning that human beings are rational beings in this particular context. His point of contact with the natural man is "beneath the threshold of his working consciousness." Van Til viewed any priority placed upon the mind as a point of contact as compromise with apostate thought.

Here we also have a reason for the rejection of natural theology. There is no dependence on general revelation *in the classic sense* but complete dependence upon innate knowledge. However, when the presuppositionalist uses Romans 1:20-21 as the support for his position, that evidence is not altogether present. Romans 1:20-21 does not prove the existence of *innate* knowledge. Romans 1:20-21 declares the existence of a knowledge of God *derived* from the observable world of His creation. Again, in the words of John Murray, "Phenomena disclose the noumena of God's transcendent perfection and specific divinity."⁴ Murray could hardly be more specific in his analysis.

B. The Bible's Point of Contact

From what has already been said, the legitimate point of contact with unbelievers involves the fact all human beings are created in God's image as rational beings. That is, we all have minds. We can communicate with one another. More importantly, God can communicate with us.

Calvin affirms this position in his comments on the Gospel of John. The apostle John speaks of Christ and says, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). He also speaks of "the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9, King James Version). The light here cannot be saving light. It is light that illumines *every* person. Commenting on John 1:4, Calvin says,

I think this is a reference to that part of life in which men surpass the other animate creatures. It is as if he were saying that the life given to men was not life in general but life united with the light of reason.⁵

And with reference to John 1:9 Calvin goes on to explain,

I prefer the other meaning--that beams from this light are shed on the whole human race of men, as I said before. For we know that men have this unique quality above the other animals, that they are endowed with reason and intelligence and that they bear the distinction between right and wrong engraven in their conscience.⁶

In other words, Calvin sees this universal light to be, at least in part, human-kind's rational capacities.

This is the point of contact we have with all others. We are made with minds and the ability to communicate. We are made in God's image. God therefore can impart information to us through both general and special revelation. We also can argue for the existence of the God of the Bible from general revelation and we can set the truth of Scripture before a lost world.

In turn, lost men and women *can*, in a formal way, grasp what we are saying. They *can* follow our arguments. We *can* debate those arguments. We *can* also present arguments with impeccable logic which are compelling. In addition, I am at this point persuaded we can present

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Apologetics*, An Unpublished Syllabus, p. 61.

² Abraham Kuyper, *Sacred Theology* (Wilmington: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), p. 104.

³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), p. 265.

⁴ Murray, *loc. cit.*

⁵ John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, tran. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), vol. 4, p. 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

historic proofs for the existence of God which are compelling. Romans 1:20-21 testifies to this. On the other hand, and this is quite important, we cannot of ourselves *persuade* an individual to accede to our arguments. The moral bias in the mind, the evil disposition, must be removed if a person is to be persuaded. This is the import of the words of Jesus, "You must be born again" (John 3:7).

As a result, we see two things. First, *information* from general revelation and special revelation must be presented. Second we must argue from the theater of general revelation for the existence of God. We must also argue from the content of special revelation for the gospel. Nothing will be accomplished without this. There will be no conversions to Christ without such forceful presentations of the gospel. Second, there will also be no conversions to Christ without the work of the Holy Spirit illuminating the mind to see the beauty of the facts and arguments for Christ. Both must be present. We are charged with the former activity. God and God alone does the latter; but the latter will not take place without the former.

V. THE THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Van Til's theory of knowledge really denies the possibility of our having access to a real knowledge of God as just related. This seems like a very strong statement. But let me attempt to verify it.

A. Analogical Thinking

At the heart of Van Til's system we find the concept of analogical thinking. This is one of three types of thought. First, there is univocal thought. This is the idea of direct correspondence. For example, if *I* say the word "bark," and there is only *one* meaning for the word, the bark on a tree, then *you* get the message. *You* think of bark on a tree. This is univocality. Univocal thinking does not exist between us and God. There is never *complete* identity between what God says and our understanding. We always fall short. We cannot have a comprehensive knowledge of the bark on a tree simply because we are finite and God is infinite. God knows all there is to know about bark on a tree.

Second, there is equivocal thought. Take the same word, "bark." Simply *saying* the word actually sends several

different signals. We could be talking about bark on a tree, a dog's bark, or a sailing vessel. The use of the word here is equivocal. The meaning is in doubt. It might be one of three different meanings. With regard to God we can say that God speaking in Scripture is not equivocal with us. We can usually determine the meaning of His words.

Third, there is analogical thinking. In analogical thinking there is similarity while there is neither complete identification, univocity, nor complete difference, equivocation. In order for there to be an analogy, there must be a univocal *element* present in the concept of the analogy. If this were not the case, the analogy would break down. For example, Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many mansions" (John 14:2). We know what a house is. We know that Jesus is telling us that something analogous to the houses we know is in heaven. That is, we expect a glorious *place to live* in heaven. We certainly do not have a comprehensive understanding of what Jesus is saying. There is not direct identity in every respect between what Jesus says and what we comprehend. There is no univocity here. There is analogy. Yet there is a univocal element present in the analogy else we would not be able to understand Jesus at all.

B. Van Til's Concept of Analogy

Van Til's concept of analogy differs from that just presented. It involves Van Til's heartfelt desire to preserve the transcendence of God. One of Van Til's objectives in his apologetic is to preserve the transcendence of God. It is my opinion that Dr. Van Til has preserved the transcendence of God to the forsaking of His imminence. How? Van Til believes in two levels of existence.

Christians believe in two levels of existence, the level of God's existence as self-contained and the level of man's existence as derived from the level of God's existence. For this reason, Christians must also believe in two levels of knowledge, the level of God's knowledge which is absolutely comprehensive and self contained, and the level of man's knowledge which is not comprehensive but is derivative and re-interpretive. Hence we say that as Christians we

believe that man's knowledge is analogical of God's knowledge.⁷

Plainly, Van Til rests his understanding of analogy on his division of reality into two levels of existence. The relationship between the two levels of reality and two levels of knowledge he calls analogical. Listen to Van Til again:

Christian-theism says there are two levels of thought, the absolute and the derivative. Christian theism says that there are two levels of interpreters, God who interprets absolutely and man who must be the re-interpreter of God's interpretation. Christian-theism says that human thought is therefore analogical of God's thought.⁸

Gilbert B. Weaver directs attention to these same quotes in *Jerusalem and Athens* in his discussion of analogical thinking. Weaver gives what he sees as an example of analogical thinking from Van Til. I again quote the original source. "When we speak of our concept or notion of God, we should be aware that by that concept we have an analogical reproduction of the notion that God has of himself."⁹ What is this analogical reproduction? Van Til explains. "Our notions or concepts are finite replicas of God's notions."¹⁰

I am personally amazed at what Van Til says. It seems that for him, analogical thinking involves our producing finite replicas within our minds. This seems to me to be a violation of the Second Commandment. The Larger Catechism says the Second Commandment forbids "the making of any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, *either inwardly in our mind*, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever...."¹¹ What brings Van Til to this position?

Weaver, commenting on these texts from Van Til, says, "Having gone this far, Van Til does not attempt to tell *how*

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), p. 12.

⁸ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defence of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), p. 64

⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 206.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Larger Catechism Answer 109, italics mine.

this image or analogical relationship of God's mind and man's mind operates."¹² This is true. Van Til does not appear to tell us how this can be. He simply asserts that it is. Light comes however when we realize Van Til has constructed a two level view of reality *similar* to Kant and *similar* to Barth who followed Kant. This is a serious indictment; but I think it is true. We see the practical implications of it in the refusal of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to ordain Gordon Clark. Among many other matters discussed in the debate between Van Til and Clark was the idea of the incomprehensibility of God. A complaint brought against the Presbytery of Philadelphia to the Twelfth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church contains the following paragraph which helps us in our understanding of analogical thinking according to Van Til. Van Til was one of the signatories of the complaint.

While we appreciate the effort to arrive at certainty with reference to man's knowledge of God, in our judgment this is done at too great a cost. It is done at the sacrifice of the transcendence of God's knowledge. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are past finding out. The secret things belong unto our Lord. If we are not to bring the divine knowledge of his thoughts and ways down to human knowledge, or our human knowledge up to his divine knowledge, we dare not maintain that his knowledge and our knowledge coincide **at any single point**. Our knowledge of any proposition must always remain the knowledge of the creature. As true knowledge, that knowledge must be analogical to the knowledge God possesses, but it can never be identified with the knowledge which the infinite and absolute Creator possesses of the same proposition.¹³

Van Til's concept of analogy leaves us with two worlds separated in such a fashion that our knowledge and God's knowledge cannot and do not coincide at

¹² E.R. Green (ed.), *Jerusalem and Athens* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), p. 325.

¹³ Minutes of the Twelfth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1945, p. 14. The bold print is in the original!

any single point. Van Til's analogical thinking therefore does involve us in the making of finite replicas. But how can we replicate what we cannot know?

C. A Kantian Connection

There is here an effort to maintain the transcendence of God. This was also the desire of Karl Barth. He saw God as "wholly other." There is here also a manifestation of the two worlds of Kant. The level of reality in which God exists is divided from the level of reality in which human beings exist. The noumenal realm of God's existence cannot be reached from the phenomenal realm of human existence. The wall or chasm between the two is such that there is absolutely no coincidence at any single point between our knowledge and God's knowledge. If this is the case, all analogy is lost and we are left with equivocation.

When Jesus says, "In my Father's house there are many mansions" (John 14:2), we may ask what Jesus means. If there is absolutely no point at which there is coincidence between God's notion of a house and our notion of a house, how do we know what Jesus is talking about? We don't! If this is true concerning the concept of a house, how much more is it true when we begin talking about God Himself?

We might attempt to proof text Van Til's position with Isaiah 55:8 to which reference is made above, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts." However, this text does not display God's thoughts are unattainable by us. The point in Isaiah 55:8 is ethical.

If we look up to heaven, we find God's counsels there high and transcendent, his thoughts and ways infinitely above ours, v. 8, 9. The wicked are urged to forsake their evil ways and thoughts (v. 7) and to return to God, that is, to bring their ways and thoughts to concur and comply with his.¹⁴

If Matthew Henry is correct, and I think he is, then Isaiah 55:8 proves just the opposite of what we might expect if we take it out of context. We are to understand that God's thoughts concerning our conduct are high and holy. Our

¹⁴ *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), vol. IV, p. 320.

thoughts and ways are lowly and sinful. We are to bring our thoughts and ways into conformity with God's thoughts and ways. This would be impossible if analogical thinking is defined in the way Van Til defines it. That is, if we follow the way of Kant as it seems Van Til has done.¹⁵

VI. TYING IT TOGETHER

A. Perceived Flaws in Presuppositionalism Listed

1. It seems that *analogical knowledge* as understood by the presuppositionalist rests on a conception of reality which denies the possibility of knowledge.¹⁶ The presuppositionalist says concerning God's knowledge "we dare not maintain that his knowledge and our knowledge coincide **at any single point**."¹⁷

2. The presuppositionalist takes this position because God's transcendence must not be compromised. God's world and our world are utterly distinct and separate. So the presuppositionalist argues that we think analogically. "Our notions or concepts are finite replicas of God's notions."¹⁸ But *how* do we construct finite replicas of that which we cannot know?

3. Our point of contact *cannot* therefore involve rational reflection on objective revelation. Our point of contact with the unbeliever *must* "be beneath the threshold of his working consciousness."¹⁹ But this is contrary to Romans 1:20 which says God's revelation gives the *unbeliever* "cognition" of God's "invisible perfections" through His "observable handiwork."²⁰

4. Presuppositionalism also denies the possibility of a natural theology. There are two levels of existence, God's world and our world. The noumenal realm of God's existence is separated from the phenomenal realm of our existence by an impenetrable barrier as indi-

¹⁵ For more on this see: Ronald H. Nash, *The Word of God and the Mind of Men* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), and Robert L. Raymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976).

¹⁶ See Part V., B.

¹⁷ See note 25.

¹⁸ See note 22.

¹⁹ See note 13.

²⁰ See note 8.

cated in #1 and #2. This too is contrary to Romans 1:20. As Professor Murray says, "Phenomena disclose the noumena of God's transcendent perfection and specific divinity."²¹

5. Any priority placed upon the intellect as the gateway to the heart is repudiated by the presuppositionalist. Such an approach is falsely denounced as rationalism.²²

6. This appears to stem from two additional problems. First, there is inadequate emphasis placed upon the image of God in the broad sense in the presuppositionalist system. The importance of man's creation as a rational being is virtually ignored.²³

7. Second, there is a lack of understanding regarding the exact nature of the effect of sin on the mind. Many presuppositionalists will say sin renders people *unable* to understand the Bible if they are not born again.²⁴

8. There are two additional problems here. First, the *ability* to think is *not* the difficulty. By and large, unbelievers can out-think most believers. It is *how* the mind is used that is at issue. The fallen mind has a bias against God and is used in opposition to God. It rejects the truth of God.²⁵

9. Second, the presuppositionalist position does not give due respect to the biblical and confessional distinction between *formal* and *intellectual* knowledge of the gospel and *saving* knowledge of the gospel.²⁶

B. The Outworking of These Flaws

1. The first result of the presuppositional system, as I see it, on a practical level, is thinking fallen people cannot understand the gospel and so there is little use presenting them the gospel. As I have said, this is the death of evangelism.

2. The second devastating outcome involves the breeding of dead orthodoxy. If we maintain a person cannot understand the gospel without being born again, any person who can articulate the content of the Confession and give intellectual assent to the Confession is eligi-

ble for church membership. We make no distinction between *formal intellectual* knowledge and *saving* knowledge and assure people who have only a formal knowledge of the gospel they are bound for heaven. Then we wonder about the lack of life within the church.

3. My conclusions are no doubt colored by my experience in Sterling where more than one individual has told me that they did not come to a saving knowledge of Christ until well after they made a public profession of faith in this congregation. It is therefore my conviction there is more of this going on in our circles than we care to admit.

C. Other Areas for Consideration

There are several other areas of concern which I have not covered. I'll mention two of them.

1. The presuppositional apologetic of Cornelius Van Til maintains the reasonableness of *circular reasoning*. Such reasoning uses "evidence involving premises which assume the conclusion to be established."²⁷ For example, when asked why he believes the Bible to be the Word of God, the presuppositionalist may give an answer that is circular. "I believe the Bible to be the Word of God because the Bible says it is the Word of God." In presuppositional thought, certain assumptions are always made. An argument always assumes or presupposes the reality of God or of the Bible. When you desire to prove the existence of God or the validity of the Bible, you are reduced to a circular argument.

Circular reasoning is commonly recognized as fallacious. It is ordinarily called *begging the question*.

2. A second area for consideration is the law of non-contradiction. Simply stated, the law of non-contradiction says: "A" cannot be "A" and "non-A" at the same time and in the same relation. For example, a piece of stone cannot be square and a circle at the same time and in the same relation. If the piece of stone is a column, you may look at it from the top and see a circle and from the side and see a square. The piece of stone cannot be square and circular when observed from the same angle.

Generally, presuppositionalists reject such "laws of logic" because they *think* these laws are placed upon God. God therefore becomes subject to laws outside of Himself. The argument *seems* plausible. If we maintain such a law is a manifestation of the very nature of God, a radically different perspective is placed on the subject. Interestingly enough, the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation conform to the law of non-contradiction. This is not a law imposed upon God. It is a manifestation of who He is. From this perspective the law of non-contradiction is no different than the moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments.

D. A Final Personal Note

I do not at all think I have an adequate understanding of the areas touched on in these articles. I am aware I may indeed have misrepresented presuppositionalists in what I have said. For this I beg God's forgiveness. I do stand prepared to be corrected where I may be shown to be wrong. It also seems to me, considering the seriousness of the subject for the work of the church, further study is not only warranted but mandated.

On the other hand, I am rather amazed that my position in entering into debate with presuppositionalism is viewed by some as apostasy. I have been told I am forsaking the Reformed faith and biblical Christianity. Is this true? I do not think so. The debate in which we are engaged is an intramural one. It does have wide ramifications. There is no doubt about this. I invite and would appreciate further debate, questions, and challenges. Using adherence to presuppositionalism as a test for orthodoxy, however, is questionable.

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²¹ See note 8.

²² See Part III., A.

²³ See the beginning of Part III.

²⁴ See Part I.

²⁵ See Part IV.

²⁶ See Part II.

²⁷ Dagobert D. Runes (ed.), *Dictionary of Philosophy* (Totowa, N. J.: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1979), p. 56.