

Common Misunderstandings of Van Til's Apologetics

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Part 1 of 2

Every family counselor would agree that family members must understand each other before they can resolve conflict. Unless we express ourselves clearly and listen carefully, we condemn ourselves to endless and fruitless strife.

Since I wrote a popularization of Cornelius Van Til's apologetic method twenty years ago (*Every Thought Captive*, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), I have had many opportunities to discuss his views. One thing has become clear from these conversations: many people have serious misunderstandings of Van Til's outlooks. Unfortunately, these misunderstandings have led to unnecessary conflicts within the family of God.

In this article I will address seven basic misunderstandings that have caused undue friction among Christian apologists. I am convinced that there are genuine differences among Christians in the area of apologetics, but I also believe that many of these apparent differences are not real. They result from poor communication. I hope to clarify some of these issues so that more fruitful discussion of this important subject may replace useless conflict.

Let me begin with an appeal to Van Til's advocates and opponents. Van Til's most devoted disciples should acknowledge that he did not say the last word on apologetics. He was, after all, just a man. Van Til's followers have much to learn from other approaches to this complex subject. We should be ready to improve our understanding in every way we can.

But let Van Til's opponents listen carefully as well. There is much for all of us to learn from him. Consider the legacy of men like Machen, Murray, Young, Stonehouse, and Van Til. They are not our enemies; they are fathers of Reformed theology in America. Their positive contributions to our tradition are astounding. Of course, they are not above critique. But all of them, including Van Til, deserve to be read carefully and sympathetically.

I am convinced that the more we rid ourselves of misconceptions about Van Til, the better we will be able to work together toward the common goal of developing a Biblical defense of the Faith. We are members of the same family; let's work hard to avoid unnecessary conflict and get on with challenging the world, not each other, to battle.

Misconception #1: “Van Til denied the doctrine of general (natural) revelation by arguing that unbelievers are incapable of deriving true knowledge of God from nature.”

Throughout his writings Van Til vigorously affirmed the standard Reformed doctrine of general (natural) revelation. He consistently argued that the first chapter of Romans teaches not only that all people *can know* God through nature, but that they *do know* God and his moral requirements because of natural revelation. We may deny the revelation of God in all things, but we cannot escape it. Because the universe reveals God to all, all know him.

In fact, Van Til went so far as to see this knowledge as a source of assurance for apologists. Believers may approach unbelievers with confidence because all people remain the image of God and know deep within that Christian assertions about God and the world are true. For Van Til the God-consciousness within each person is the *point of contact* between Christians and non-Christians. We can have meaningful dialogue with them because they are images of God and have knowledge of God and their status before him.

This understanding was so vital to Van Til’s thought that he described apologetic arguments as restatements and explanations of general revelation in a persuasive manner. We enter apologetic situations with sinners who are dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1), but these sinners are still image bearers. Their reason, will, and emotions bear witness against them. The whole universe bears witness against their denial of the truth, and they know it.

Support from Van Til’s writings:

“We thus stress Paul’s teaching that all men do not have a mere capacity for but are in actual possession of the knowledge of God” (*DOF* 109).

“But Reformed theology, as worked out by Calvin and his recent exponents such as Hodge, Warfield, Kuyper and Bavinck, holds that man’s mind is derivative. As such it is naturally in contact with God’s revelation. It is surrounded by nothing but revelation. It is itself inherently revelational. It cannot naturally be conscious of itself without being conscious of its creatureliness. For man self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness. Calvin speaks of this as man’s inescapable sense of deity” (*DOF* 107).

“God has never left himself without a witness to men. He witnessed to them through every fact of the universe from the beginning of time. No rational creature can escape this witness. It is the witness of the triune God whose face is before men everywhere and all the time. Even the lost in the hereafter cannot escape the revelation of God. God made man a rational-moral creature. He will always be that. As such he is confronted with God. He is addressed by God. He exists in the relationship of covenant interaction. He is a covenant being. To not know God man would have to

destroy himself. He cannot do this. There is no non-being into which man can slip in order to escape God's face and voice. The mountains will not cover him; Hades will not hide him. Nothing can prevent his being confronted 'with him with whom we have to do.' Whenever he sees himself, he sees himself confronted with God.

"Whatever may happen, whatever sin may bring about, whatever havoc it may occasion, it cannot destroy man's knowledge of God and his sense of responsibility to God. Sin would not be sin except for this ineradicable knowledge of God. Even sin as a process of ever-increasing alienation from God presupposes for its background this knowledge of God."

"This knowledge is that which all men have *in common*" (*DOF* 172-173).

"The point of contact for the gospel, then, must be sought within the natural man. Deep down in his mind every man knows that he is the creature of God and responsible to God. Every man, at bottom, knows that he is a covenant-breaker. But every man acts and talks as though this were not so. It is the one point that cannot bear mentioning in his presence" (*DOF* 111).

"With Calvin I find the point of contact for the presentation of the gospel to non-Christians in the fact that they are made in the image of God and as such have the ineradicable sense of deity within them. Their own consciousness is inherently and exclusively revelational of God to themselves. No man can help knowing God for in knowing himself he knows God. His self-consciousness is totally devoid of content unless, as Calvin puts it at the beginning of his Institutes, man knows himself as a creature before God" (*DOF* 257).

"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. But this point of contact must be in the nature of a head-on collision. *If there is no head-on collision with the systems of the natural man there will be no point of contact with the sense of deity in the natural man*" (*DOF* 115-116).

Misconception #2: “Van Til asserted that non-Christians cannot understand truth because sin has so corrupted their minds.”

Van Til emphasized that the mind did not remain intact through the Fall; we are totally depraved, corrupted by sin in all of our faculties. As a result, unbelievers have a sinful propensity toward misconstruing reality that cannot be completely eradicated. Just as unbelievers’ basic moral conviction — the denial of God’s Law as the absolute standard — corrupts even the “good” that they do, so their most basic epistemological commitment — the denial of God as the source of truth — corrupts all the “truths” that they affirm. In this matter, Van Til followed the biblical teaching that unbelievers’ minds are darkened, futile, and lacking in understanding (Eph. 4:17-18; Rom. 3:10-11).

Nevertheless, Van Til never suggested for a moment that unbelievers become as corrupt in their thinking as they could become. *In principle*, non-Christians have rejected the epistemic foundation that makes understanding truth possible. But *in practice* they do not carry through with their principle. God’s common grace enables unbelievers to have a degree of true understanding about many things. They are inconsistent with their commitment to rebellion against God, and borrow from God’s general and special revelation. Van Til affirmed his appreciation for the contributions of non-Christians to the sciences and arts, but he always reminded us that these advances are the result of God’s common grace working against the sinful tendencies of unbelievers. Left to themselves, unbelievers would become epistemologically self-destructive. They would utterly reject every truth that confronts them.

In Romans 1:18 Paul asserted that unbelievers “suppress the truth by their wickedness.” These words display the two sides of non-Christian thinking that Van Til recognized. They possess the truth and *suppress* it. You can’t suppress something you don’t possess. Van Til observed that both conditions are true to varying degrees at different times (Rom. 2:14). To be sure, he emphasized unbelievers’ suppression of the truth. His approach is oriented toward the “worst case scenario” in which unbelievers follow their sinful tendencies and remain significantly unaffected by common grace. However, Van Til also acknowledged a “best case scenario” in which God influences unbelievers to be inconsistent with their sinful tendencies and to agree with key Christian beliefs like the existence of God, the order of nature, the principles of logic, *et al.*

Van Til’s perspective has significant implications for the practice of apologetics. When common grace has enabled unbelievers to acknowledge certain true ideas, we can build a case for Christianity on these truths. For instance, if people agree that the world is orderly, we may use that biblical idea as we challenge them to respond to the gospel. If other people believe that there are moral absolutes, we may build on this concept as well.

Nevertheless, our preparation for apologetics must also equip us to handle situations in which such basic truths are denied. We live in a day when much of the common grace

Christian consensus has crumbled. Sometimes it is difficult to find much in common with unbelievers' acknowledged beliefs. People deny the order of the universe; they reject moral absolutes; they even deny the possibility of knowledge. We must be ready to challenge the most consistent unbeliever. In these circumstances, Van Til's insights are particularly helpful.

Support from Van Til's writings:

"The first objection that suggests itself may be expressed in the rhetorical question 'Do you mean to assert that non-Christians do not discover truth by the methods they employ?' The reply is that we mean nothing so absurd as that. The implication of the method here advocated is simply that non-Christians are never able and therefore never do employ their own methods consistently" (*DOF* 120).

"Why waste words on the idea that non-Christians do not have good powers of perception, good powers of reasoning, etc. Non-Christians have all these. If that were the issue, then the contention should be made that non-Christians are blind, deaf, and have no powers of logical reasoning at all; in fact, they should be non-existent" (*DOF* 292).

"Every man has capacity to reason logically. He can intellectually understand what the Christian position claims to be. Conjoined with this is the moral sense that he knows he is doing wrong when he interprets human experience without reference to his creator. I am therefore in the fullest agreement with Professor Murray when, in the quotation you give of him, he speaks of the natural man as having an '*apprehension of the truth of the gospel* that is *prior* to faith and repentance'" (*DOF* 257).

"Now the question is not whether the non-Christian can weigh, measure, or do a thousand other things. No one denies that he can. But the question is whether *on his principle* the non-Christian can account for his own or any knowledge. I argued that when two people, the one a Christian and the other not a Christian, *talk things out* with one another, they will appear to differ at every point" (*DOF* 288).

"It is this fact, that the natural man, using his principles and working on his assumptions, must be hostile in principle at every point to the Christian philosophy of life, that was stressed in the writer's little book, *Common Grace*. That all men have all things in common metaphysically and psychologically, was definitely asserted, and further, that the natural man has epistemologically nothing in common with the Christian. And this latter assertion was qualified by saying that this is so only *in principle*. For it is

not till after the consummation of history that men are left wholly to themselves. Till then the Spirit of God continues to strive with men that they might forsake their evil ways. Till then God in his common grace, in his long-suffering forbearance, gives men rain and sunshine and all the good things of life that they might repent. The primary attitude of God to men as men is that of goodness. It is against this goodness expressing itself in the abundance of good gifts that man sins. And even then God prevents the principle of sin from coming to full fruition. He restrains the wrath of man. He enables him by this restraint to cooperate with the redeemed of God in the development of the work he gave man to do.

“But all this does not in the least reduce the fact that as far as the principle of the natural man is concerned, it is *absolutely* or utterly, not partly, opposed to God. That principle is Satanic. It is exclusively hostile to God. If it could it would destroy the work and plan of God. So far then as men self-consciously work from this principle they have no notion in common with the believer. Their epistemology is informed by their ethical hostility to God.

“But in the course of history the natural man is not fully self-conscious of his own position” (*DOF* 189-190).

“The reason why the scientific, the philosophic, and the theological efforts of non-Christians contribute to the discovery of the true states of affairs is the fact that the world is what Christians say it is and it is not what fallen men say it is. It is only because man is created in the image of God, because the world about him together with himself is created and directed by God through Christ, that even non-Christian thinkers can do constructive work” (*TRA* 11).

“It is thus in the mixed situation that results because of the factors mentioned, (1) that every man knows God naturally (2) that every sinner is in principle anxiously striving to efface that knowledge of God and (3) that every sinner is in this world still the object of the striving of the Spirit calling him back to God, that cooperation between believers and unbelievers is possible. Men on both sides can, by virtue of the gifts of God that they enjoy, contribute to science. The question of ethical hostility does not enter in at this point. Not merely weighing and measuring, but the argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christianity, can as readily be observed to be true by non-Christians as by Christians. Satan knows all too well that God exists and that Christ was victor over him on Calvary. But the actual situation in history involves the other factors

mentioned. Thus there is *nowhere* an area where the second factor, that of man's ethical hostility to God, does not also come into the picture. This factor is not so clearly in evidence when men deal with external things; it is more clearly in evidence when they deal with the directly religious question of the truth of Christianity. But it is none the less present everywhere" (*DOF* 190-193).

"As to the possibility and likelihood of the sinner's accepting the Christian position, it must be said that this is a matter of the grace of God. As the creature of God, made in the image of God, he is always accessible to God. As a rational creature he can understand that one must either accept the whole of a system of truth or reject the whole of it ... He knows right well as a rational being that only the Reformed statement of Christianity is consistent with itself and therefore challenges the non-Christian position at every point. He can understand therefore why the Reformed theologian should accept the doctrine of Scripture as the infallible Word of God. He can understand the idea of its necessity, its perspicuity, its sufficiency and its authority as being involved in the Christian position as a whole" (*DOF* 166-167).

"Reformed Christians should realize that the non-Christian may have, and often does have a brilliant mind. It may act efficiently, like a sharp circular saw acts efficiently. We may greatly admire such a mind for what, in spite of its basic principle and because of the fact that God has released its powers in his restraining grace, it has done. For all that, it must not be forgotten that this mind is still, be its name Aristotle, a covenant-breaker in Adam" (*DOF* 298).

"We readily allow that non-Christian science has done a great work and brought to light much truth. But this margin of truth which science has discovered is in spite of and not because of its fundamental assumption of a chance universe. Non-Christian science has worked with the borrowed capital of Christian theism, and for that reason alone has been able to bring to light much truth" (*CTE* 69).

"Anyone who says, 'I believe in God,' is formally correct in his statement, but the question is what does he mean by the word *God*? The traditional view assumes that the natural man has a certain measure of correct thought content when he uses the word God. In reality the natural man's "God" is always a finite God. It is his most effective tool for suppressing the sense of the true God that he cannot fully efface from the fibers of his heart" (*DOF* 262).

“What then more particularly do I mean by saying that epistemologically the believer and the non-believer have nothing in common? I mean that every sinner looks through colored glasses. And these colored glasses are cemented to his face. He assumes that self-consciousness is intelligible without God-consciousness. He assumes that consciousness of fact is intelligible without consciousness of God. He assumes that consciousness of laws is intelligible without God. And he interprets all the facts and all the laws that are presented to him in terms of these assumptions. This is not to forget that he also, according to the old man within him, knows that God exists. But as a covenant breaker he seeks to suppress this. And I am now speaking of him as the covenant breaker. Neither do I forget that no man is actually fully consistent in working according to these assumptions. The non-believer does not fully live up to the new man within him which in his case is the man who worships the creature above all else, any more than does the Christian fully live up to the new man within him, which in his case is the man who worships the Creator above all else. But as it is my duty as a Christian to ask my fellow Christians as well as myself to suppress the old man within them, so it is my duty to ask non-believers to suppress not the old man but the new man within them” (*DOF* 259-260).

Misconception #3: “Van Til believed that people must consciously presuppose the Christian God by an act of blind faith” (thus the charge of fideism).

Throughout his books, Van Til emphasized the necessity of “starting with” or “presupposing” the truth of Christian theism, but he never meant by this that people should exercise faith apart from careful rational reflection. Van Til made an important distinction between two kinds of starting points.

In the first place, he spoke of the *proximate starting point* of human experience and reason. It was evident to him from Scripture that people begin to consider the claims of Christ on a psychological and temporal level with whatever they acknowledge as true. The Holy Spirit uses all sorts of experiences and arguments as means to bring unbelievers to saving faith. In this sense, all human beings “begin” with knowledge of themselves and the world around them *before* they acknowledge the God of creation.

In the second place, however, Van Til often referred to the self-attesting God of Scriptures as the *ultimate starting point* for all legitimate human reasoning. In his view, the fundamental mistake of non-Christian thought is a foundational commitment to human autonomy (independence from God). Unbelievers pretend that human reason can be its own ultimate starting point by trying to support their knowledge claims without an ultimate appeal

to the God of Scripture. But this is like a man pulling himself up by his own bootstraps. Try as he may, he will get nowhere. Van Til argued transcendently for Christian theism. In other words, he urged that the only solid foundation for true knowledge, even the possibility of knowledge, is the Christian God. The only thing that adequately explains how we know and what we know is the self-existent Triune God. This is the sense in which Van Til called for people to “presuppose” Christian theism — not as a blind leap of faith, but as the only concept that can provide ultimate support for human knowledge. Any other foundational commitment or presupposition will eventually result in utter irrationalism.

In practice, Van Til’s approach instructs us to begin working with unbelievers wherever they are. We answer their questions; we challenge their falsehoods. After all, this is the proximate starting point. Nevertheless, our goal in apologetics is to call men and women to acknowledge the Christian God as the ultimate starting point for knowledge. We are not simply trying to help them think more clearly. We are not adding a layer of faith onto their futile autonomous foundation. We are calling them to forsake the human mind as their ultimate starting point and to give the God of Scriptures his rightful place in their lives.

Support from Van Til’s writings:

“According to the principle of Protestantism, man’s consciousness of self and of objects presuppose for their intelligibility the self-consciousness of God. In asserting this we are not thinking of psychological and temporal priority. We are thinking only of the question as to what is the final reference point in interpretation. The Protestant principle finds this in the self-contained ontological trinity. By his counsel the triune God controls whatsoever comes to pass. If then the human consciousness must, in the nature of the case, always be the proximate starting-point, it remains true that God is always the most basic and therefore the ultimate or final reference point in human interpretation” (*DOF* 94).

“The orthodox notion begins with God as the concrete self-existent being. Thus God is not named according to what is found in the creature, except God has first named the creature according to what is in himself. The only reason why it appears as though God is named according to what is found in the creature is that, as creatures, we must psychologically begin with ourselves in our knowledge of anything. We are ourselves the proximate starting point of all our knowledge. In contrast to this, however, we should think of God as the ultimate starting point of our knowledge. God is the archetype, while we are the ectypes. God’s knowledge is archetypal and ours ectypal” (*IST* 203).

Misconception #4: “Van Til denied that human beings can know truth about God because an impenetrable barrier separates the human mind from the Creator’s mind.”

Van Til frequently focused attention on the differences between divine and human knowledge. His emphasis on the Creator-creature distinction has led some to think that he erected an impenetrable wall between human and divine knowledge. But Van Til vigorously denied these inferences by insisting on discontinuity and continuity between divine and human reason.

On the one hand, Van Til argued for discontinuity between our knowledge and God’s knowledge. He pointed out that God has known all from eternity; humans know only as they learn in time. God’s knowledge is exhaustive; we only know in part. In this sense — but only in this sense — divine and human knowledge have *no coincidence*. Nothing is peculiar in these views. They simply express the orthodox doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. Humanity cannot fully comprehend divinity.

On the other hand, Van Til argued just as strongly for a rational relationship of continuity between God and humanity. As images of God, our rationality is patterned after God’s rationality. For this reason, our knowledge of truth *coincides with God’s knowledge at every point*. In other words, we know the same objective truths that God knows (although He knows much more), and God’s knowledge includes our understanding. Otherwise, we could have no true knowledge.

Van Til consistently urged us to think God’s thoughts after him. We reason analogically by patterning our thoughts after the revelation of God in Scripture and nature. In this way, we share knowledge with God. Our knowledge is partial and God knows infinitely more, but truth is truth both for God and humanity.

Support from Van Til’s writings:

“As Christians, then, we believe that human knowledge of the world and of God is (a) not exhaustive and yet (b) true. We are *created* in God’s image, and therefore our knowledge cannot be exhaustive; we are created in *God’s* image, and therefore our knowledge is true” (*IST* 24).

“We may safely conclude then that if God is what we say he is, namely a being who exists necessarily as a self-complete system of coherence, and we exist at all as self-conscious beings, we must have true knowledge of him ... All this we express theologically when we say that man is created in God’s image. This makes man like God and assures true knowledge of God. We are known of him and therefore we know him and know that we know him. God is light and therefore we have light” (*DOF* 57).

"Important as it is to insist that our knowledge of God must be true, because God is what he is, it is equally important to insist that our knowledge of God is not and cannot be comprehensive. We are God's creatures. We cannot know God comprehensively now nor can we hope to know God comprehensively hereafter. We may know much more in the future than we know now. Especially when we come to heaven will we know more than we know now, but we will not know comprehensively."

"We are therefore like God so that our knowledge is true and we are unlike God and therefore our knowledge can never be comprehensive. When we say that God is a mystery for us we do not mean that our knowledge of him is not true as far as it goes. When we say that God is transcendent above us or when we say that God is 'the absolutely Other,' we do not mean that there is not a rational relation between God and us. As God created us in accordance with his plan, that is, as God created us in accordance with his absolute rationality, so there must be a rational relationship from us to God. Christianity is, in the last analysis, not an absolute irrationalism but an absolute 'rationalism.' In fact we may contrast every non-Christian epistemology with Christian epistemology by saying that Christian epistemology believes in an ultimate rationalism while all other systems of epistemology believe in an ultimate irrationalism" (*DOF* 57-58).

"In the first place, it is possible in this way to see that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man coincide at every point in the sense that always and everywhere man confronts that which is already fully known or interpreted by God. The point of reference cannot but be the same for man as for God. There is no fact that man meets in any of his investigation where the face of God does not confront him. On the other hand in this way it is possible to see that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of man coincide at no point in the sense that in his awareness of meaning of anything, in his mental grasp or unchangeable understanding and revelation on the part of God. The form of the revelation of God to man must come to man in accordance with his creaturely limitations. God's thought with respect to anything is a unit. Yet it pertains to a multiplicity of objects. But man can think of that unit as involving a number of items only in the form of succession. So Scripture speaks of God as though he were thinking his thoughts step by step. All revelation is anthropomorphic. When God reveals himself to man he reveals something of the fullness of his being. In God's mind any bit of information that he gives to man is set in the fullness of his one supreme act of self-affirmation" (*IST* 164-165).

“For when God tells us about his attributes he is telling us about himself. Every bit of his revelation shows man something of the nature of the essence of God. If we speak therefore of the incomprehensibility of God, what is meant is that God’s revelation to man is never exhaustively understood by man. As by his revelation to man God says something about himself, so that man knows something about everything that exists, so it is equally true that there is nothing that man knows exhaustively. It is as impossible for man to know himself or any of the objects of the universe about him exhaustively as it is impossible for man to know God exhaustively. For man must know himself or anything else in the created universe in relation to the self-contained God. Unless he can know God exhaustively he cannot know anything else exhaustively.

“It is only if these two points be taken together, the fact that man knows something about everything, including the very essence of God, and on the other hand that he does not know anything exhaustively, that the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God can be seen for what it is” (*IST* 164).

“As human beings we must know or interpret the facts after we look at the facts, after they are there and perhaps after they have operated for some time. In the case of God, on the other hand, God’s knowledge of the facts comes first. God knows or interprets the facts before they are facts. It is God’s plan or his comprehensive interpretation of the facts that makes the facts what they are” (*DOF* 27).

“A corollary from the doctrine of the Trinity is that human knowledge is *analogical*. Human knowledge must always depend upon divine knowledge. Anything that a human being knows must first have been known to God. Anything a human being knows he knows only because he knows God. For that reason too man can never know anything as well and as exhaustively as God knows it.

“The fact that man’s knowledge must always remain analogical is applicable to his knowledge of God as well as to his knowledge of the universe. God will never be exhaustively understood in his essence by man. If he were, he would no longer be God. In that case there would be no solution for the problem of knowledge.

“A third corollary from the doctrine of the Trinity is that man’s knowledge though analogical is nevertheless true. Or to put it more specifically, man’s knowledge is true *because* it is analogical. It is analogical because God’s being unites within itself the ultimate unity and the ultimate plurality

spoken of above. And it is true because there is such a God who unites this ultimate unity and plurality. Hence we may also say that only analogical knowledge can be true knowledge” (*DOF* 48).

Abbreviations in this article:

CG = Common Grace
MA = Metaphysics of Apologetics
SCE = Survey of Christian Epistemology
CTE = Christian Theistic Evidences
CTK = Christian Theory of Knowledge
A = Apologetics
TRA = Toward a Reformed Apologetics
IST = Introduction to Systematic Theology
DOF = Defense of the Faith