

Van Til: His Simplicity and Profundity

By John Frame

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Our Orthodox Presbyterian Church is a small body and has little influence in the world or even in the worldwide Christian community. For its size, however, it has had as members a remarkable number and quality of Christian scholars. That fact may at times distort our perspective. We OP's may be tempted, for instance, to think regarding Cornelius Van Til that since he is one of us he cannot really be very important. OP's remember Van Til as a familiar, friendly face at church gatherings— the fellow who washed dishes at congregational meetings so his wife could vote, the grandfatherly minister who loved kids and told jokes about chickens and such, the flaky professor who threw chalk at wayward students, the kindly man who visited hospital rooms and prayed with strangers as well as friends.

A good man, a gracious, humble, fun and friendly man, as we all know him— yes. But also a thinker of enormous power, combining unquestioned orthodoxy with dazzling originality; a theologian who challenges us to our very roots, who burns out our insides to expose our rebellion against God. Though speaking of apologetics as the “defense of the faith,” he puts the Christian thinker on the *offense*, perhaps more than ever before, exposing the utter bankruptcy of unbelief. Van Til's teaching (in the words of one who studied with him but does not agree with his distinctive views) is a “devastating experience.” One does not leave that experience unchanged, unless he is dead, physically or spiritually. Van Til, yes, *our* Van Til, is perhaps the most important Christian thinker of the twentieth-century.

What's he all about? Well, at one level, Van Til's thought is far too complicated and deep to be expounded in *New Horizon!* He is a philosophical theologian, unapologetically intellectual. I have been through his works many times and still keep learning new things or freshly understanding old ones. Van Til's writings ought to generate more humility in his interpreters than they do: oversimplifications of Van Til are legion. I wish I had a nickel for every speech I've heard in presbytery or elsewhere, when someone thought he was expounding Van Til and was actually dead wrong. And Van Til's interpreters-in-print, both friends and critics, have also missed the boat far too often.

But though Van Til's thought, like that of many great thinkers, is often oversimplified, at another level (and this is another characteristic of theological greatness- compare Luther, Calvin, Kuyper, Machen) his insight is brilliantly simple. Let me try to state that simple insight for you, fully aware of the danger that I too may be oversimplifying!

Two simple points, which all Christians know: God is Lord, and God is Savior. (1) *God is Lord*: Therefore he has a right to rule all of life *including our thinking*. Our minds must be subject to him, "thinking his thoughts after him." Thus in every thought we must *presuppose* him. God and his word are the most reliable, the most certain things we know, and therefore they are the criteria for all other truths. Nothing is more sure: not mathematical truths, not logic, not the evidence of our senses, not our own existence. His word is the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity. God may not be "proved" by some principle that is supposedly more certain than he is, like cause or purpose or logic or self-existence. Rather, no concept is intelligible unless it already presupposes the reality of God. Cause, e.g., is God-ordained cause, or it is nothing at all.

(2) *God is Savior*: Sinful man refuses to presuppose God, to recognize God's lordship. Therefore he needs salvation. Salvation involves renouncing one's own lordship and acknowledging that of Christ. Therefore the sinner must be radically changed (II Cor. 5:17), in every aspect of his life, including thought (II Cor. 10:5), if he is to be saved from sin. The philosophies, theologies, sociologies, psychologies, indeed all the thoughts of unbelief are drastically defective from a Christian point of view. They result, not from "unbiased" or "neutral" inquiry, but from willful, sinful distortion of the truth (Rom. 1:18-32, I Cor. 1:18-31, 3:18-20, II Cor. 4:3f, Col. 2:8). Therefore the Christian apologist must challenge them head-on, rather than seeking compromise ("neutrality," "common ground") between the Gospel and these ideologies. Unbelievers must be challenged to repentance in all of life, including the intellectual. Unless we present that kind of challenge, at least implicitly, we are not presenting the Gospel at all, as it is in Scripture.

That, I think, is the essence of it. Van Til, at one level, is simply a preacher of the Gospel, presenting Christ as Lord and Savior. But he applies these simplicities to man's intellectual life. That's when it starts getting complicated. Armed with these basics, Van Til develops penetrating critiques of Plato, Kant, Hegel, Schleiermacher, Barth, modern psychology, etc. He shows the inadequacy of the "traditional apologetics" (Aquinas, Butler, Montgomery, Gerstner, Carnell, et al., which seeks to prove the truth of the Bible without presupposing God¹ and without challenging the pretended autonomy of unbelief.

¹ Yes, there is circularity here, but how can it be avoided? In proving God, we must appeal to God, for there is nothing higher to appeal to. Every system, not only the Christian system, must argue circularly for its fundamental principle: for a rationalist to prove the primacy of reason, he must appeal to reason!

Van Til also has fascinating, wise things to say about common grace, the doctrine of scripture, ethics, logic and paradox, the incomprehensibility of God, the Trinity, the deity and humanity of Christ: in these areas you can learn things from him that you cannot learn anywhere else. Others have applied his thought to economics, politics, mathematics and other disciplines.²

Van Til is not perfect or infallible; only the Bible has those qualities. There are many areas in Van Til's thought that require clarification, some that need rethinking. One area in which he himself admitted difficulty was the question of how, and to what degree, an unbeliever could suppress the truth of God, yet acknowledge truth "in spite of himself."³ That Van Til himself admitted difficulty at this point ought to give pause to the many Van Til disciples who think they have a simple answer to this question!⁴ Another important admission of Van Til (which also ought to moderate the zeal of his less moderate followers): He told me that he did *not* believe his distinctive views should be made a test of orthodoxy in the church. He did not consider them to have that sort of final, definitive character.

But whatever may be his human limitations, we can thank God that Cornelius Van Til has spent these many years in our midst. May God give him health and strength, together with great joy in the fruits of his labors and in the Savior whose Lordship and grace he has tirelessly proclaimed.

Some Introductions to Van Til's Thought

E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens*. Essays in honor of Van Til, mostly about him. Contains responses by Van Til to critics.

Jim Halsey, *For a Time Such as This*. Some good formulations here, close to Van Til in language, style and emphasis, but for that very reason it doesn't help *clarify* Van Til very much. I don't recommend this volume. It contains some confused ideas and tends to be unnecessarily (and misleadingly) dogmatic and precise.

George Marston, *The Voice of Authority*. Recently reprinted, this book very simply and lucidly presents the essential Van Til insights. George is one of our senior OPC ministers, who spent many years traveling on behalf of Westminster Seminary. Doubtless he spent a substantial amount of time explaining Van Til!

² See Gary North, ed., *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (Vallecito, Calif., Ross House Books, 1976).

³ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 26.

⁴ I work on this question a bit in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), and in *Cornelius Van Til* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1995).

Thom Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence*. A slender volume which deals very clearly and helpfully with a major problem in Van Til's thought: if we presuppose God, why bother with evidence?

Richard Pratt, *Every Thought Captive*. Developed and tested in a church setting to teach evangelism to high school and post-high youth. A Van Tillian apologetic that most all of us can understand.

Rousas J. Rushdoony, *By What Standard?* More sophisticated (and difficult) than Marston or Pratt, contains some helpful illustrations.

Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*. The standard presentation of his distinctive position. Difficult at points.

—, *Why I Believe in God?* This little pamphlet is what hooked me on Van Til. Best writing Van Til ever did. Raises more questions than it answers, but creates a real hunger for what Van Til offers elsewhere.

William White, *Van Til— Defender of the Faith*. “Authorized biography.” Interesting anecdotes, mostly from Van Til himself. Not a scholarly biography, nor a reliable guide to Van Til's thought. Van Til deserves something better! How about one of you OPC historians preparing one for his centennial?

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