Christian apologetics (the reasoned defense of our faith) can seem like a daunting and complicated task. There are so many arguments, methodologies and facts to master—it is enough to drive many to frustration and giving up on it altogether. But what if instead of memorizing multiple arguments and facts you could find one argument that would be the argument to end all arguments? Perhaps it is too good to be true, but this is part of the intrigue of the apologetic method of Cornelius Van Til. While he did not create the ‘apologetic silver bullet,’ his approach basically boils down to this,

“The theistic proofs therefore reduce to one proof, the proof which argues that unless this God, the God of the Bible, the ultimate being, the Creator, the controller of the universe, be presupposed as the foundation of human experience, this experience operates in a void. This one proof is absolutely convincing.”

He is revered by many to be the grandfather of Presuppositional Apologetic methodology although some dismiss him as merely a fideist—requiring people to believe in God apart from any evidence. However, Gordon Lewis, surveying various approaches to Christian apologetics said that one must interact with Van Til’s apologetic precisely because of its highly controversial nature, because if it is correct, every other approach “seriously

---

1 Van Til, Common Grace and the Gospel, 192.
2 For example, see Geisler, Christian Apologetics, 56—58. However, this charge of fideism is unwarranted. See White, What is Truth, 53 “Van Til concludes that consistent fideists by seeking to withdraw from intellectual argument have ‘virtually admitted the validity of the argument against Christianity… They will have to believe in their hearts what they have virtually allowed to be intellectually indefensible.’"
compromises the Christianity [it] attempts to defend." His transcendental (meaning: relating to a spiritual or nonphysical realm) argument for theism was unique in that it yields not merely generic theism—belief in a vague undefined concept of ‘god’—but rather the certain conclusion of Christian theism—belief in the Triune God of the Bible. He argued for the certainty of the conclusion since that conclusion is what provides the necessary preconditions for reasoning itself—so that doubting the conclusion precludes the possibility of doubt itself. That is, if you doubt the conclusion that the Christian God exists, you actually knock out the very foundation upon which you can doubt! Therefore, Van Til remains a prominent figure in apologetics, and his work continues to be developed toward building an apologetic methodology which is faithful to biblical theology and simple while not being simplistic.

Biography

He was born on May 3, 1895 in the Netherlands to a large family of devout Calvinists, Cornelius Van Til’s family immigrated to America in 1905 and became members of the Reformed Church. Van Til did his B.A. at Calvin College then a Th.M at Princeton Theological Seminary followed by a Ph.D. from Princeton University. He was strongly influenced by the Reformed Theologians at Princeton and took his systematic theology from B.B. Warfield and Herman Bavinck. He married Rene Klooster and was ordained as a pastor in the Christian Reformed church in 1927. Van Til started as an instructor and then was elected Professor of Apologetics at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Princeton had specific views of what it means to know God which influenced the seminary. However, in 1929, the faculty of

3 Lewis, Testing Christianity’s Truth Claims, 144.
4 His transcendental argument can be seen expressed more fully in his works Defense of the Faith and Christian Apologetics, which are cited throughout this work and listed in the bibliography at the end.
5 Anderson, “If Knowledge Then God,” 57—60.
6 White, What is Truth, 37.
7 White, What is Truth, 38. Van Til was also influenced by Geerhardus Vos, Caper W. Hodge, Robert Dick Wilson, Oswald T. Allis, J. Gresham Machen and Abraham Kuyper.
8 Anderson, Reason and Worldviews, 4. One of the main differences was that Princeton theologians, such as Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield, held that general revelation was clear enough to hold men without excuse. “In contrast to positions that argued that God can only be known through special revelation, Warfield argued that one must first see that God exists in order to have the message of special revelation authenticated.”
Princeton split due to perceived compromises to intellectual attacks with some leaving to form Westminster Theological Seminary in order to preserve the old Princeton tradition. Van Til also left to join Westminster and his Presuppositionalism was an attempt to merge the best of both views of general and special revelation and to establish the Bible as the ultimate foundation for knowledge. He combined Calvin’s theocentricity, Machen’s confessional consciousness, Vos’s biblical insights and Kuyper’s antithesis in his apologetic approach. Van Til would remain at Westminster Theological Seminary until he retired in 1975. He died at ninety-two in 1987 leaving behind a huge legacy in the development of a distinctively Reformed Apologetic.

An Apologetic Founded on Scripture

Van Til in some ways may be said to have followed in the footsteps of Augustine (354-430 CE) who, commenting on the Gospel of John said that, "understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou mayest understand..." Van Til believed absolutely in the authority of the Bible—due to its nature as the Word of God—and that it should be the foundation of how we shape our apologetic. This forms the core basis of Van Til’s methodology. He said,

"I take what the Bible says about God and his relation to the universe as unquestionably true on its own authority. The Bible requires men to believe that he exists apart from and above the world and that he by his plan controls whatever takes place in the world. Everything in the created universe therefore displays the fact that it is controlled by God, that it is what it is by virtue of the place that it occupies in the plan of God."

For Van Til, the Christian must never concede to an unbelieving presupposition in our effort to defend the faith, for the non-Christian and Christian alike both exist in God’s world whether they believe it or not. The atheist assumes that the human is autonomous, but in fact they are not—rather they are what Scripture says, which is a fallen creature of God. Therefore, they should subordinate their fallen reason to the Scriptures to seek to interpret

---

10 Muether, *Cornelius Van Til*, 18.  
12 Augustine, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel according to St. John,” 184; See also White, *What is Truth*, 43 where he comments that Van Til insisted that regeneration is prior to knowing.  
15 Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, chapter 2.5
their experience in light of it. All facts must point to the truth of the system of which they are a part—therefore, if the Christian theistic system is true, what else can the facts do but reveal the system of which they exist within?

### Inexcusability and Certainty

His methodology is different from reasoning by means of evidence to belief—it is instead presuppositional—reasoning from belief, which then translates to how we deal with evidence. Van Til saw Romans 1, along with other texts, as foundational for the presuppositions we start with when reasoning with unbelievers. For Van Til, the inductive use of evidences to show the truth of Christianity only establishes the probability of Christianity. But mere probability would not establish the inexcusability of unbelief (Rom. 1:20) and thus does not sustain the need for redemption if humans are excusable for their unbelief. The need for redemption assumes guilt, which means that humans failed to do something they knew they should.

Thus, the general revelation of God must be readily available to their reason so that their unbelief is inexcusable. There is objective evidence in abundance which is sufficiently clear for people to reason that God exists. Van Til said that though the unbeliever seeks to bury the voice of God which comes to them through nature, they cannot be wholly successful and cannot escape the voice of God. “The natural man accuses or else excuses himself only because his own utterly depraved consciousness continues to point back to the original natural state of affairs. The prodigal son can never forget the father’s voice. It is the albatross forever about his neck.” He said that since the Fall, people have always tried to make themselves

---

16 Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, chapter 4.3.  
17 Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, chapter 4.4.  
20 Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, chapter 2.3.
believe that God does not exist, for who wants to admit that they are a sinner and worthy of eternal death?21

Suppression in Unrighteousness Leaves No Neutral Ground

This means then that the problem for the unbeliever is not a lack of knowledge, but rather their suppression of what they already know innately—their ‘sense of deity.’22 Van Til said that it is to this that the apologist must look to as their point of contact,

“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.”23

For Van Til there could be no neutral place between the Christian and non-Christian worldviews, since the basis for knowledge, reason and the uniformity of nature depends upon the very worldview which the non-Christian seeks to disprove. So, the task of the apologist is not to try to find common facts which are agreed upon and attempt to reason from within the non-Christian’s worldview and framework to win them over to Christianity.24 Rather, a head-on collision is required, and the apologist must challenge the starting point in the unbeliever’s worldview—even the very framework itself so that the whole structure comes down.25 It is the basic assumptions which the unbeliever presupposes

21 Van Til, Is God Dead, 35.
22 Van Til, Christian Apologetics, chapter 3.5. He held that people’s minds are derivative and naturally in contact with God’s revelation—being surrounded by it. People cannot be self-conscious without being conscious of their ‘creatureliness,’ and thus presupposes God-consciousness. This was what Calvin spoke of as man’s inescapable sense of deity.
23 Van Til, Christian Apologetics, chapter 4.1.
24 White, What is Truth, 52.
25 Van Til, Christian Apologetics, chapter 4.2. Van Til argued that if we believe what Scripture says about the nature of people after the Fall, then at their deepest level they know that they are responsible to God but they suppress the knowledge of themselves as they truly are. For that person, they are a person with the iron mask on. “A true method of apologetics, must seek to tear off that iron mask.”
Van Til’s Presuppositional Methodology

Van Til had a few methods which he developed to be faithful to these theological presuppositions and distinguish his methodology from that of Evidentialist approaches which simply presented evidence to the unbeliever and left it to them to ‘decide for themselves whether God existed or not.’ He considered his method of reasoning as being indirect rather than direct. This was because the issue between Christians and non-Christians cannot be settled by a direct appeal to facts or laws which are agreed upon by both parties. Rather, it must be questioned what is the final reference point to make those facts and laws intelligible and what they really are. He wrote that he would not talk endlessly about facts without ever challenging the non-believer’s philosophy of fact, or how they even knew facts or interpreted them.

Basic to Van Til’s formulations of his theology and thought as a whole is what he called the ontological Trinity. Ontology is a branch of metaphysics (that which goes beyond the mere physical world such as the first principles of things: knowing, substance, cause, identity, time and space) dealing with the nature of being. It is the study of ‘being’ or existence or reality. “By speaking of the ontological Trinity, Van Til referred to God as he exists immutably, eternally, and personally in complete Trinitarian self-sufficient independence from creation.” The ontological Trinity is the presupposition behind everything including all of history and knowledge. That is, the being or existence of the Triune God is that which layse behind everything—even our ability to know things. This was the basis of his transcendentalism—to investigate what was at the very foundation of the possibility of what is, or being, and of meaning. Once he established this, his transcendental argument moved

26 Anderson, Reason and Worldviews, 55
27 Van Til, Christian Apologetics, chapter 4.2.
28 White, What is Truth, 48.
29 Baird, Analogical Knowledge, 79.
from what is to the conditions which make it possible.\(^\text{31}\)

### Pushing the Antithesis

In practice, Van Til sought to challenge the naturalist’s ideas of brute facts (brute facts are those facts which cannot be explained, they just are) in metaphysics and the notion of the autonomy of the human mind in epistemology (the theory of knowledge) since they were “the colored glasses through which he sees all the facts.”\(^\text{32}\) One of the ways he sought to do this was by pushing the antithesis (that which is the opposite or contrast of something). He said,

“The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument’s sake, in order to show him that on such a position the “facts” are not facts and the “laws” are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument’s sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do “facts” and “laws” appear intelligible.”\(^\text{33}\)

Van Til would argue that if the naturalist’s position were true, when taken to its logical conclusion, it would render the debate itself impossible because the position denies the things necessary for reasoning.\(^\text{34}\) For example, he pointed out that if one presupposed with the naturalist the ultimate non-rationality of facts which results from chance, then there is no such thing as validity to logic.\(^\text{35}\) That is, if everything is just the result of mere chance or chaos, we should not expect logic or coherence. If factuality is controlled by chance, then seeking to make intelligible assertions about the world of arbitrary chance cannot be done—for to make assertions about chance is irrational and self-contradictory.\(^\text{36}\)

As one reads Van Til, his ability to state and assume the position of the opposing side, then to argue from that position in order to bring it to its logical conclusion and thereby expose its deficiency is uncanny.\(^\text{37}\) Furthermore, Van Til would argue for the impossibility of

\(^{31}\) White, *What is Truth*, 44

\(^{32}\) Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, chapter 5.3.

\(^{33}\) Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, chapter 4.2.

\(^{34}\) Anderson, *If Knowledge Then God*, 59.

\(^{35}\) See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, chapter 12.1 for a fuller expansion of this argument.

\(^{36}\) Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, chapter 5.1.

\(^{37}\) A good example of this is in his booklet, *Is God Dead?* Where he critiques liberal ‘God is Dead’ theologians using this method.
the contrary—meaning that, because the Christian worldview is the true reality, any other epistemology (theory of how we know things) which does not begin with Christian presuppositions is doomed to failure and ends up eliminating even the possibility of knowledge. Therefore, the proof of the Christian position is that “unless its truth is presupposed there is no possibility of ‘proving’ anything at all.”

Critiques of Van Til

Van Til’s methods have undergone significant critiques from various apologists who differ in their theology and methodology. Owen Anderson critiques Van Til’s method for its circularity of argument in explaining inexcusability. He says, “Inexcusability requires not circularity but the use of reason to establish one’s presupposition. Reason, as the laws of thought, should not be confused with a presupposition because reason, as the laws of thought, is used for establishing any meaningful presupposition.” James Emery White also critiques him—that he made presuppositions, perspectives and worldviews the all-consuming difference in philosophical positions—thereby underestimating other differentiating factors. He said, “Evidentialists believe that it is important to support biblical claims with external evidence in order to engage the modern mind with the truth of the gospel. Van Til believed that the Bible is true because the Bible says that it is true.” He continues that Van Til’s approach leaves limited role for external verification to be used in the defense of the faith and it assumes the truth of the position it has yet to prove. For White, Van Til’s indirect proof from the uniformity of nature of the existence of God is not satisfactory to human reason.

Anderson contends that it is reason which is necessary for argumentation to show contradictions in presuppositions, not merely an affirmation of the existence of God. “God is necessary for intelligibility because all other worldviews violate the law of non-contradiction and hence violate reason. In the most basic sense reason is necessary for intelligibility, and not

---

38 White, What is Truth, 47.
39 Anderson, Reason and Worldviews, 64.
40 White, What is Truth, 56.
41 White, What is Truth, 55.
42 White, What is Truth, 55—58.
all worldview presuppositions are coherent.” Other critiques of Van Til’s approach included his presupposition of Calvinistic interpretation of Scripture as correct due to the fact that hermeneutics plays a huge role in applying his methodology. How would one determine the objective correspondence to Scripture when we are limited to subjective interpretation of the text? Also, what are the dynamics between the use of reason and the noetic effects of the Fall? Are all unregenerate persons thinking apart from biblical revelation similarly prone to error in areas such as mathematics?

Van Til’s Legacy in Apologetics

However, despite objections to Van Til’s methodology, he has left a huge legacy in the development of a distinctively Reformed approach to Apologetics. The critiques of the circularity of his arguments sometimes end up missing the point that if one affirms an ultimate authority—the nature of ultimate authority is that it cannot appeal to anything greater than itself to validate itself. All ultimate truth claims therefore must be circular. His work has been continued to be built upon and refined by those following after his footsteps at Westminster such as K. Scott Oliphint, John M. Frame, as well as the late Greg Bahnsen and others who have advanced his thought and addressed areas of difficulty. Also some non-reformed popular apologists, such as Ravi Zacharias, uses the methodology of critiquing the worldview presuppositions and foundations of knowledge and logic of his opponents in his apologetic which has been hugely successful around the globe.

Another strength of Van Til’s approach was the understanding that an approach which proves only a vague generic theism then cannot be the only theism and definitely should not be the type of theism that any Christian should want to prove. For then all we’ve accomplished is producing a deist who is still likewise unsaved. Mere belief in a god is not

43 Anderson, Reason and Worldviews, 64.
44 For an exegetical analysis of the scriptural foundation for Van Til’s apologetic, please see Turner, Cornelius Van Til and Roman 1:18-21.
45 White, What is Truth, 59—61.
47 Van Til, Christian Apologetics, chapter 4.4.
sufficient. He also recognized that unregenerate humanity is never placed in a position to act as judge over God by the Scriptures, but rather the challenge to God's ultimate authority to define good and evil, truth and lie, is what lay at the beginning at the Fall in Genesis 3. Van Til said that “Scripture does appeal to this sense of deity in man, but it does so and can do so only by denying that man, when acting on his adopted monistic assumption, has any ability or right to judge of what is true or false, right or wrong.”

Scripture itself teaches us to speak and preach the foolishness of the Cross, as well as to reason with blind men, because it is God who can cause the blind to see and thus our preaching is never in vain. “Once we were blind; God reasoned with us, perhaps through some human agency, and we saw.”

For the unbeliever to convert, they change from not seeking and understanding what is clear about God to beginning to seek and understand. Van Til recognized fully that if a sinner accepted the Christian position, it must be a matter of the grace of God. Thus, it is only when the Holy Spirit gives a person a new heart that they will accept the evidence of Scripture and what it says the nature of reality to be. This is an area which much of modern apologetics has lacked in, as its approaches can be too focused on a man-centered approach which is too heavily dependent on human cleverness without an adequate sense of the need for God to do for us that which we cannot. If we are to be faithful in our apologetic to a biblical understanding of what conversion entails, we must understand the absolute necessity of the work of the Spirit in conversion, and thus any good apologist in the field must be a warrior on their knees. It is this legacy of Van Til—in ultimate confidence in the Scriptures to shape our methodology and desperate reliance on the Spirit in prayer—which continues to challenge us today, and we continue to learn more in the development of his thought.

---

50 Anderson, Reason and Worldviews, 6.
51 Van Til, Christian Apologetics, chapter 5.3.
52 Van Til, Christian Apologetics, chapter 2.5.
Bibliography


