

Van Til's Challenge to Illegitimate Common Ground

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

The last two issues of Penpoint have featured essays on the apologetic of Dr. Cornelius Van Til, as does this one, because 1995 is the centennial of his birth, and one of our key objectives at SCCCS has been to honor, preserve, and advance Van Til's distinctive and reformational defense of the Christian faith. [FOOTNOTE: See my article "Socrates or Christ: The Reformation of Christian Apologetics" in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, ed. Gary North (Vallecito, CA: Ross House, 1976), pp. 191-239 (available from CTM).] It is worth preserving.

One reason for that is Van Til was granted a God-honoring, Biblical clarity about the issue of "common ground" between those who adhere to the Scriptures and those who repudiate or compromise the teaching of God's word -- whether outright unbelievers or followers of false religions, theological modernism, Romanism, or the cults.

Van Til called for faithfulness to the Lordship of Christ in all of our thinking. Thus our ultimate presuppositions must regulate every phase of our reasoning, including our argumentation in defense of the faith.[FOOTNOTE: See "Van Til's 'Presuppositionalism'" in the Penpoint for January, 1995 (v. 6, no. 1), pp. 1-2).] There is no neutrality.[FOOTNOTE: See chapters 1-4 in my syllabus, *A Biblical Introduction to Apologetics* (1976, available from CTM) which discuss the robbery of neutrality, the immorality of neutrality, and the Biblical antithesis between the mind of the believer and unbeliever.] Only the presupposed truth of God's self-revelation -- which all men know even if suppressed in unrighteousness[FOOTNOTE: See "Van Til and Self-Deception" in the Penpoint for December, 1994 (v. 5, no. 10), pp. 3-4.)] -- makes intelligible their claims to knowledge about anything whatsoever and makes justification of those claims possible. Thus the all-encompassing apologetical challenge issued by Van Til was that without the Christian God men could not, in principle, prove or know anything at all.

Van Til wrote: [BLOCK, INDENT: The implication of this for Christian apologetics is plain. There can be no appeasement between those who presuppose in all their thought the sovereign God and those who presuppose in all their thought the would-be sovereign man. There can be no other point of contact between them than that of head-on collision. (*The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* [1950], p. 19)

Van Til's critics sometimes misconstrued this challenge as saying that there is no common ground between the thinking of believers and unbelievers. Van Til affirmed that there is indeed common ground, but it is not religiously neutral common ground.[FOOTNOTE: See my *Biblical Introduction to Apologetics*, chapter 10.] He wrote: [BLOCK, INDENT: 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.... So far then as men self-consciously work from this principle [of sin, autonomy], they have no notion in common with the believer. Their epistemology is informed by their ethical hostility to God. (*The Defense of the Faith* [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955], 1st ed., pp. 189-190.)]

When we deal with men on the level of their theory of knowledge (epistemology), Van Til held that we must remember the doctrine of "total depravity" -- and thus challenge in every area of life and at every point all who repudiate or compromise the Scriptures. In philosophical principle they could not make anything intelligible in any aspect of human experience.

Of course there have been notable evangelicals who find Van Til's presuppositional apologetic too demanding and all-encompassing. For them there is room for neutral common ground in certain areas, or there is room for compromise in certain areas with those who corrupt the gospel. They stand opposed to Van Til's distinctive contribution to Christian scholarship.

Van Til and Carl Henry

In 1960 Van Til wrote a syllabus entitled *The New Evangelicalism* (76 pp.) which is still in the library and archives of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) where he taught for over forty years. The syllabus analyzes the efforts of men like Bernard Ramm, E. J. Carnell, Billy Graham, and Carl Henry to have "more friendly relations" with the world of unbelief -- and to make more "cooperative" endeavors with compromised versions of Christian profession -- than did the "narrow fundamentalism" against which these men were reacting.

In chapter 4 on "The Rationale of the Gospel," Van Til assessed the scholarly apologetic offered by Carl Henry, who held that certain forms of pagan philosophy were "nearer" to the Christian view of nature than others -- so that the best systems of unregenerate thought could provide a point of contact for the gospel. This illegitimate hope for a certain religiously neutral area of common ground and cooperation stood opposed to the antithetical character of unbelieving thought against which Van Til consistently warned his students. So he wrote:

[BLOCK,INDENT: The point of contact with the natural man must be found, not in a system of thought constructed by him, but in the revelation of God that he seeks to suppress.... Herewith the basic weakness of the apologetical approach of Henry and his associates is already indicated.... The difficulty with this method is that the highest form of non-Christian thought rests upon the same foundation as the lowest form of non-Christian thought. This foundation is man as would be self-existence and self-explanatory.... On this basis the law of contradiction would itself be a product of chance.[FOOTNOTE: Compare the Bahnsen-Stein debate at the University of California (1985), available on tape from CTM.] ... It is only if the natural man, in whatever garb, is shown that his god is nothing more than an idol, that he will be challenged to see that Christianity is the only live option for him. And it is this, unfortunately, that Henry is unwilling to do. (pp. 62-63)]

Van Til taught us that Christianity is not simply "better" than the "highest" forms of pagan thought (as though some idols are less offensive than others to God), but the only position which does not philosophically destroy the possibility of knowing anything whatsoever. There are no mediating positions, only covenant-keepers and covenant-breakers.

Van Til and Charles Colson

An evangelical brother who has more recently urged the Christian community in a direction which is hostile to the distinctives of Van Til's apologetic is the Watergate conspirator Charles Colson. We surely praise God for his gracious conversion. Such rejoicing does not entail an endorsement of the theological maturity and reliability, much less apologetical expertise, of any young convert, however. And there is much in Colson's own thinking which calls for gentle, but firm, correction for the sake of greater fidelity to the gospel.

Van Til taught that nowhere in life could there be found neutral common ground between Christians and secularists. However, in Colson's book entitled (ironically) *Kingdoms in Conflict* he maintains that such common ground can be found in the political arena (p. 48), which would mean that the life and death antithesis between belief and unbelief is muted there. For him the mortal enemies of the Enlightenment and the Christian faith find "a patch of common ground on American soil" (p. 119)! [FOOTNOTE: See Gary North's discussion of "Colson's Dilemma" in *Biblical Economics Today* v. 16, no. 6 [Jan., 1995], p. 3.] Van Til would be appalled -- as would any of his students familiar with the three-volume syllabus "Christianity in Conflict" (1962-1964), particularly volume 3: "Renaissance and Reformation."

Colson's affirmation of an area of illegitimate common ground was also evidenced during the last year in his becoming a prominent signer of a document calling for a "truce" between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics for the sake of certain cooperative efforts. In publicly discussing the document -- which indicts "needless conflict" between Romanists and Evangelicals -- Colson condemned those who evangelize Roman Catholics by criticizing the Roman Church, something Van Til did throughout his career. But in this condemnation, Colson is the party in error.

In many of his writings Van Til was concerned to uphold "the antithesis" between Romanism and the Reformation, arguing in detail (for instance throughout *The Defense of the Faith*) that Rome compromises with the thinking of the natural man, creates an illusory common area of agreement called "nature," and fails to challenge the autonomy of the unbeliever as a result. He said: "The argument is that inasmuch as traditional Roman Catholicism does not hold to the gospel in its purity, it cannot challenge the modern unbeliever to see that both in his thinking and in his living he is bankrupt" (*The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* [1971], p. 73).

If the apologist is to be faithful to the faith which he defends, Van Til taught us, he must not compromise the gospel or the all-encompassing challenge it makes to the thinking of men. Thus Van Til had the courage and consistency to resist compromises with illegitimate forms of "common ground" -- whether in the "highest form" of pagan philosophy, the secular political ideals of the Enlightenment, or Romanist reasoning about the realm of "nature." His spirit was

that of the Apostle Paul, who rhetorically warned us "What communion has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14).

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In a postscript which is sad and dismaying, we note that Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) will sponsor a March apologetics conference in this centennial of Van Til's birth, but where keynote speakers include Carl Henry and Charles Colson. [FOOTNOTE: In fairness to the school, its brochure (although picturing Van Til on the cover) only says: "Westminster's flagship department is Apolo-ge-tics.... Cornelius Van Til pioneered "Presuppositional Apologetics," believing it was more biblical than traditional methods. One hundred years after his birth, we are sponsoring a conference in which we develop and apply this discipline." The discipline of apologetics is featured, I realize, without explicitly claiming to be honoring or perpetuating Van Til's own distinctives (to which some speakers are, after all, opposed). Still, it is disappointing.