

## **Van Til's *Why I Believe in God***

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

Want a small gem which explains and illustrates presuppositional apologetics? Then get hold of Cornelius Van Til's brief pamphlet "Why I Believe in God." It isn't flashy in style. It isn't complex in content. But it is devastating.

The pamphlet is less than twenty (small) pages long and is written in an easy, conversational style. It has Van Til "talking" to the reader in an imaginary dialog over belief in God - comparing his life to the reader's hypothetical background and education, parrying objections, and always coming back to the underlying nature of the dispute itself.

No intimidating vocabulary. No difficult scientific insights. No series of premises and complicated inferences. Indeed, the argument is present with such subtlety that some first-time readers wonder whether there is even an argument there.

But there is. And it is profound. What the pamphlet does is illustrate the "transcendental" method<sup>[1]</sup> of defending the faith - without ever needing to call it that or use other philosophical parlance. Here we have one of the most brilliant minds of the twentieth century explaining the most profound proof of Christian theism - in terms which we can all understand! (I like to call it "Transcendental Argumentation for Everyman.")

Van Til originally wrote "Why I Believe in God" nearly half a century ago. It was published in 1948 by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's Committee on Christian Education (Tracts for Today, No. 9). It has subsequently been reprinted as a promotional brochure by Westminster Theological Seminary. Later in his life Van Til produced a booklet ("Toward a Reformed Apologetics") to indicate the chief purpose for which he had written the various books, syllabi and pamphlets published during his career. The very first publication he sets forth there is his pamphlet "Why I Believe in God." Here is his brief summary of the its central thrust: "I was brought up on the Bible as the Word of God. Can I, now that I have been to school, still believe in the God of the Bible? Well, can I still believe in the sun that shown on me when I walked as a boy in wooden shoes in Groningen? I could believe in nothing else if I did not, as back of everything, believe in this God."

As the Psalmist said of the living and true God, "In Thy light shall we see light" (Psalms 36:9).

Van Til continues his summary: "Can I see the beams underneath the floor on which I walk? I must assume or presuppose that the beams are underneath. Unless the beams were underneath, I could not walk on the floor."

When we defend the faith with those who object to it, we should constantly point out, as Van Til does with his imaginary opponent in "Why I Believe in God": "in presenting all your facts and reasons to me, you have assumed that such a God [the All-Conscious, All-Conditioning Controller of every fact] does not exist. You have taken for granted that you need no emplacement of any sort outside of yourself." That is, unbelievers argue in a way which assumes the very thing they should be proving (that this God does not exist) and in a way which blindly assumes that they are intellectually autonomous.

In "Why I Believe in God" Van Til writes: "True reasoning about God is such as stands upon God as upon the emplacement that alone gives meaning to any sort of human argument." The unbeliever cannot bring together both order (unity) and change (diversity) in his reasoning or in his view of reality. "So," says Van Til, "you have made nonsense of your own experience."

Arguments against God are self-defeating, then. "Unless I have Him as the All-Conditioner, life is Chaos." Reasoning itself (whether against God or in favor of Him) presupposes God in order to be intelligible. Thus Van Til concludes that "unless you believe in God you can logically believe in nothing else."

[1] In philosophy, a "transcendental" argument is one which pertains to the preconditions for the intelligibility of human experience.