Cornelius Van Til
The Defense of the Faith
Lecture 2
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Scriptures to Know

1 Cor 10:31
So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

2 Cor 10:5
We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

1 Cor 2:14
The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

John 3:3
In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

John 3:5
Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

Deu 29:29
The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.
Outline

• Background on Van Til, including WTS
• Background – what is a worldview? Why is it important?
• Background – Van Til’s starting point
• Chapter 1, Christian Theology
• Chapters 2 through 4, The Christian Philosophy
• Chapters 5 through 7, Christian Apologetics
• Chapter 8, Common Grace and Scholasticism
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God’s Attributes

• “The incommunicable attributes of God stress his transcendence and the communicable attributes stress his immanence.” DOF, pg. 32

• We finished the incommunicable attributes last time
Communicable Attributes

• Spirituality – God does not have a physical body

  John 4:24 God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth.

• Invisibility – Because God does not have a physical body, we can’t see him

  John 1:18 No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

• Omniscience – God knows everything ...
God’s Knowledge

• The distinction between God’s knowledge and ours is crucial in Van Til’s theology and apologetic so we will need to discuss it at length, a small part now, and more later (this topic also led to the dispute between Gordon Clark and Van Til)

• Van Til refers to God’s knowledge as “analytical”. He means analytic in contrast with synthetic

• We need a short philosophical aside ...
Philosophical Aside

– An analytic statement is true by definition, for in such a statement the predicate is part of the subject, as in “All bachelors are unmarried.” Analytic statements are necessarily true; they cannot possibly be false. And they are *a priori* in the sense that they can be known by knowing the meaning of the terms alone, without observation or experience of anything beyond the language.

– Synthetic sentences, such as “the cat is on the mat,” are not true or false by definition. To determine their truth, we must investigate the world of experience. Thus, they are *a posteriori*, that is, based on an empirical inquiry.

HWPT, pg. 187
Philosophical Aside

• *a prior* knowledge (from the former) is knowledge possessed prior to looking at any external evidence, specifics are deduced from general principles known to be true – this is the primary means of gaining knowledge according to rationalists

• *a posteriori* knowledge (from the latter) is knowledge possessed after looking at external evidence, inductive logic is used to go from specifics to general principles – this is the primary means of gaining knowledge according to empiricists

    e.g., see HWPT, pg. 178
God’s Knowledge and Facts

• Van Til says,

  “God’s knowledge of the facts comes first. God knows or interprets the facts before they are facts.”  
  DOF, pg. 32

• In other words, God’s knowledge is *a priori* knowledge, but in his case whatever he thinks is true *defines what is true* because he makes it true.

  His knowledge of that which now takes place in the universe is logically dependent upon what he has from all eternity decided with respect to the universe.  
  DOF, pg. 62

• We will deal with our knowledge later
God’s Personality

• “What we have discussed under the attributes of God may also be summed up by saying that God is *absolute personality.*” DOF, pg. 33

“personality is a concept borrowed from the human realm and hence, when applied to God, always to some extent falls short.” Herman Bavinck, DOF, fn 17, pg. 33

“In Reformed thought, the notion of personality is meant to include the fact that God has a mind, consciousness, and will.” K.S. Oliphint, DOF, fn 17, pg. 33
The Trinity

• “God exists as a tri-personality. ‘The trinity is the heart of Christianity.’ The three persons of the Trinity are co-substantial; not one is derived in his substance from either or both of the others. Yet there are three distinct persons in this unity; the diversity and the identity are equally underived.”

DOF, pp 33-34
The Doctrine of Man

• Since apologetics deals with the relations between God and man, the doctrine of man is also of fundamental importance

• Man is created in God’s image
  – Wide sense: Man is also personal (i.e., he is a moral creature with a mind and a will)
  – Narrow sense: man was created with true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness

Col 3:10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Eph 4:24 and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.
The Doctrine of Man

• But – man was *created* – we are *like* God, but we are *not* God (or gods) and we never will be. We will never, even in heaven, understand God fully

• We were created to be “organically related to the universe”  
  1. prophet – as a prophet man was to interpret this world  
  2. priest – as a priest man was to dedicate this world to God  
  3. king – as a king man was to rule over the world for God

[DOF, pg. 35]
The Fall

• As a creature, man is to live in accordance with the law of God, which is written on his heart

Rom 2:14-15 Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts
The Fall

When man fell it was therefore his attempt to do without God in every respect. Man sought his ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty somewhere beyond God, either directly within himself or in the universe about him. ... The result for man was that he made for himself *a false ideal of knowledge*. Man made for himself the ideal of absolute comprehension in knowledge.  

*Gen 3:4-5* "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

But think about Deut 29:29!
The Fall

“when man saw he could not attain his own false ideal of knowledge, he blamed this on his finite character. *Man confused finitude with sin.*”

DOF, pg. 37

- Adam did not admit his rebellion against God but tried to shift the blame to Eve, who then tried to shift it to the serpent, which essentially blames sin on our creatureliness (i.e., had Adam known what would truly happen, he would not have been deceived), but sin is wicked rebellion, not just a limitation or weakness!
Man’s Knowledge

• As man sought knowledge after the fall he was bound to fail so long as he sought knowledge apart from God and his revelation

• Empiricists emphasized inductive logic and sense experience for gaining knowledge (a posteriori knowledge), thinking that we can be neutral in our evaluation of the facts
Man’s Knowledge

• Van Til calls facts that do not need an interpretive framework to be understood “brute facts” and says that no such facts exist (VTA, fn 20, pg. 268)

• This realization argues against empiricism

  – Because our worldview is the lens through which we see reality and there is no blank-slate worldview, there are no brute facts
Man’s Knowledge

• Rationalists emphasized deductive logic based on innate knowledge – principles that we hold to be true prior to sense experience or external evidence (a priori knowledge)

• But if you begin with a non-Christian worldview, you are suppressing the truth and cannot arrive at truth deductively (and cannot know anything “truly” since, in Van Til’s terminology, that would require a correct worldview)
Men’s Knowledge

• Our knowledge is a mixture of *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge – our *a priori* knowledge is innate, given to us by God
  
  – e.g., that God exists, that we exist, that we are different from other people and animals, the law of noncontradiction

• Remember that Van Til rejected a purely rational or empiricist method and adopted Kant’s transcendental method; we should examine the presuppositions necessary to explain the world, including us – the most fundamental presupposition is the triune God of the Bible!
Man’s Knowledge

• Van Til concludes:

human knowledge is analogical of divine knowledge. We cannot avoid coming to a clear-cut decision with respect to the question as to whose knowledge, man’s or God’s, shall be made the standard of the other. The one must be original and the other analogical of the original.  

DOF, pp 62-63

• What is “analogical” thinking or knowledge?

Oliphint says: the notion of analogy was meant to communicate the ontological and epistemological difference between God and man. 

DOF, pg. 62, fn 25
Man’s Knowledge

• Van Til wrote:

When on the created level of existence man thinks God’s thoughts after him, that is, when man thinks in self-conscious submission to the voluntary revelation of the self-sufficient God, he has therewith the only possible ground of certainty for his knowledge.

Since the human mind is created by God and is therefore in itself naturally revelational of God, the mind may be sure that its system is true and corresponds on a finite scale to the system of God. That is what we mean by saying that it is analogical to God’s system. VTA, pp 225-226
Man’s Knowledge

- Van Til therefore emphasized that man must know God *first*, only then can he truly know himself.

We have constantly emphasized the concept of God as being basic to everything else which a Christian believes. This is so because God exists, as he exists, necessarily. For that reason we cannot know ourselves in any true sense unless we know God.  

DOF, pg. 66

Remember Calvin: “Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”

Institutes, 1.1.1
Van Til on Knowledge

• Van Til says “knowledge is an ethical question at root”. Oliphant explains;

It is such because included in it is one’s relationship to God.

DOF, pg. 39 fn 31
Van Til on Knowledge

• In other words, knowing a fact correctly is not “true knowledge” if the entire system of our understanding is wrong (our worldview), and our worldview is relational and ethical because its core presupposition is either love for God or enmity against God.

Rom 8:6-8 The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.
Van Til on Knowledge

Therefore, “false knowledge” can be entirely accurate in the sense that it assents to true propositions, but it is false because the context of the knowledge is rebellion against God.
Man’s Knowledge

• Finally, Van Til notes that because we can never fully understand God, we can never fully understand his creation either (e.g., we would need to know the final purposes and plans for everything)

• This limitation on our knowledge has a serious implication for Christian thinking and apologetics:

  Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical.

• In other words, there will always be apparent contradictions

  DOF, pp 67-68
Man’s Knowledge

• Example paradoxes (Van Til calls antinomies)
  – How can prayer be effectual if God has foreordained everything that comes to pass?
  – How can man be morally responsible when God is absolutely sovereign over all?
  – How can creation glorify God when he is “all-glorious” apart from creation?

• With regard to the last one, Van Til makes an interesting observation ...
Purpose of History?

We were in the nature of the case completely interpreted before we came into existence; the universal plan of God needed not to be supplemented by historical particulars and could not be supplemented in this way. The historical could not produce anything wholly new. ... On the other hand the historical must have genuine significance. Or else why should God have created it? ... So we seem to have on the one hand a bucket that is full of water, and on the other hand we seem to add water to this bucket which we claim to be already full.

DOF, pg. 68
The Doctrine of Christ

- “Christ came to bring man back to God. To do this he was and had to be truly God.”
  DOF, pg. 37

- Van Til then discusses the offices of Christ
Christ as Prophet

- WSC #24 says:

  Christ executes the office of a prophet, in revealing to us, by his Word and Spirit, the will of God for our salvation.
Christ as Prophet

“Now if we recall that man set for himself a false ideal of knowledge when he became a sinner, that is, he lost true wisdom, we may say that in Christ man was re-instated to true knowledge. In Christ man realizes that he is a creature of God and that he cannot seek for comprehensive knowledge. Christ is our wisdom.”

DOF, pg. 38

1 Cor 1:30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

And to be “in Christ” is to be born again! John 3
Christ as Priest

• WSC #25 says:

Christ executes the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God; and in making continual intercession for us.
“Christ could not give us true knowledge of God and of the universe unless he died for us as priest. The question of knowledge is an ethical question at the root. It is indeed possible to have a theoretically correct knowledge about God without loving God. The devil illustrates this point. Yet what is meant by knowing God in Scripture is knowing and loving God: this is true knowledge of God: the other is false.”

DOF, pg. 39
Christ as King

- WSC #26 says,
  Christ executes the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies

- As King, Christ subdued us to himself by regeneration, based on his atoning death
Van Til correctly notes:

We have laid stress upon the organic relation between the offices of Christ. We must now point out that the same organic relationship exists between what Christ did for us and what Christ did and does within us. ... Inasmuch as we are dead in trespasses and sins, it would do us no good to have a wonderful life-giving potion laid next to us in our coffin. It would do us good only if someone actually administered the potion to us.  

DOF, pp 39-40
The Doctrine of Salvation

• Van Til also explains that it is necessary for our salvation to be a monergistic work of God:

If God was to be maintained in his incommunicable attributes, the Spirit of God, not man, had to effect the salvation of man. ... if we say that man can of himself accept or reject the gospel as he pleases, we have made the eternal God dependent upon man. We have then, in effect, denied the incommunicable attributes of God.                DOF, pg. 40

i.e., God’s unchangeable plan would depend on man, he could not be omniscient or omnipotent in the truest sense
Van Til notes that the church comprises all those whom God has sovereignly chosen in eternity past and to preserve God’s attributes, we must again deny that man determines whether or not to repent and believe.

It is this fact of God’s absoluteness as expressed in his election of men that gives us courage in preaching and in reasoning with men. Sin being what it is, we may be certain that all our preaching and all our reasoning with men will be in vain unless God brings men to bay.
The Doctrine of Last Things

- Van Til again emphasizes the importance of the Creator/creature distinction

Belief in the promises of God with respect to our eternal salvation is meaningless if God does not control the future. ... The Christian philosophy of nature and the Christian philosophy of history are the diametrical opposites of the non-Christian philosophy of nature and the non-Christian philosophy of history.  

DOF pg. 42