



Cornelius Van Til
The Defense of the Faith
Lecture 3

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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

Systematic Theology is Important

- Beeke and Smalley wrote:

Hearing and remembering God's Word requires more than just reciting texts from the Bible, for God's law does not explicitly regulate every situation. Rather, it requires a worldview that takes into account the whole counsel of God in order to guide the whole life. Therefore, the obligation to obey God's Word necessitates the theological task, for obedience requires the engaging of one's whole mind to discern God's will by the integration of his various revelations into a unified whole. Without systematic theology, we cannot apply the fullness of God's Word to our lives.

J. Beeke and P. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, Crossway, 2019, pg. 140

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Christian Philosophy

- Van Til addressed his apologetic to “educated” individuals:

Men in general do not use or even know our theological terms. But, to the extent that they are educated, they have had some training in secular philosophy.
DOF, pg. 45
- The three areas of secular philosophy are metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics (being, knowledge and ethics)
- Accordingly, in Chapters 2 through 4 Van Til discusses the Christian view of philosophy in these three areas

Outline – Christian Philosophy

- Chapters 2 through 4, The Christian Philosophy
 - Chapter 2, The Christian Philosophy of Reality
 - Chapter 3, The Christian Philosophy of Knowledge
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Christian Metaphysics

- The first topic Van Til deals with is the problem of the one-and-many
- This is a classic problem in philosophy, which is concerned with both the nature of reality (metaphysics) and with how we understand reality (epistemology)
- He mentions this often, so we will very briefly go over it, but I don't think most people worry about this problem, so we will be as brief as possible and then draw one important conclusion at the end

Problem of the One-and-Many

- The problem is that there are very many objects with which we come into contact

Problem of the One-and-Many

- Van Til wrote:

The *many* must be brought into contact with one another. But how do we know that they can be brought into contact with one another? How do we know that the many do not simply exist as unrelated particulars? The answer given is that in such a case we should know nothing about them; they would be abstracted from the body of knowledge that we have; they would be *abstract* particulars. On the other hand, how is it possible that we should obtain a unity that does not destroy the particulars? We seem to get our unity by generalizing, ... If we keep up this process of generalization till we exclude all particulars, ... Have we then obtained anything but an *abstract* universal? AoHT, pg. 71

Problem of the One-and-Many

- If we want to know something about an object, one option is to identify it as belonging to certain categories; e.g., Fido belongs to the category “brown” and the category “dog”
- We can move up the ladder of abstraction: canine, mammal, living being, beings
- The highest level is being itself (the One), which includes everything and, therefore, tells us nothing (it is an abstract universal in Van Til’s language)

Problem of the One-and-Many

- Alternatively, we can move down from the general to the particular
 - We could consider our experiences of Fido: warm, furry, wet tongue, wagging tail, bark
 - Or we could note that he has legs, a head, heart, lungs, etc., these are made up of cells, which are made up of proteins + ..., these are made up of molecules, atoms, etc.
- What is the end of this process?
- We arrive some kind of ultimate matter, which again has no meaning by itself (an abstract particular in Van Til's language)

For the best discussion of this see AoHT, pp 71-76

Problem of the One-and-Many

- Frame notes:

In the end, there is no difference between “being in general” and “ultimate matter.” Both concepts are empty, uninformative, and unintelligible. And if the real essence of everything, the real truth about the world, is to be found in either of these concepts, then the world is completely devoid of intelligible meaning.

AoHT, pg. 74

Problem of the One-and-Many

- Van Til frequently refers to God as the only “concrete universal” (i.e., something real and which includes everything in its scope, DOF, pg. 17, fn73) and says that it is only in the Christian worldview that we have a solution to the philosophical problem of the one-and-many

The notion of the concrete universal has been offered by idealist philosophy in order to escape the *reduction ad absurdum* of the abstract particular and the abstract universal. It is only in the Christian doctrine of the triune God, as we are bound to believe, that we really have a *concrete universal*. DOF, pg. 49

Problem of the One-and-Many

- Frame says of the one-and-many:

How is it that this seemingly well-intentioned search for truth leads up such a blind alley? Van Til's analysis is that essentially both concepts [seeking an ultimate universal or particular] are idols, and thus self-destructive. They are idols because they are the result of man's desire for an exhaustive understanding of the world, an understanding that only God can have.

AoHT, pg. 74

Problem of the One-and-Many

- Here is the one important point!
- We ignore the Creator/creature distinction if we think we can ever achieve an exhaustive understanding of creation
- And as a result, we are sinning if we approach science or philosophy this way – we must begin with God, and we must realize we are creatures

Miracles

- Van Til mentions that physical “laws” are just generalizations of God’s control of creation

Christianity is an historical religion. It is based upon such facts as the death and resurrection of Christ. The question of miracle is at the heart of it. Kill miracle and you kill Christianity. But one cannot even define miracle except in relation to natural law. VTA, pg. 37

- Van Til notes that the God of the Bible is the only “universal” that can account for the facts of creation and providence, including miracles

Sin and its Curse

- Having dealt with the fact that the nature of reality is defined and controlled by God, Van Til adds the reality of the fall to his picture of the nature of being

Due to the sin of man the curse of God rests upon the whole creation. Man has joined Satan in his opposition to God. At the same time God has inserted a remedial influence against sin into the world. This remedial work centers in the Christ.

DOF, pg. 52

Metaphysics - Summary

- The most important point of Christian metaphysics is the Creator/creature distinction
- The Creator is the Triune God who reveals himself in the Bible (WSC #4-6)
- God planned all of creation and history (including miracles)
- God created and interprets all facts of creation
- The creation is providentially ruled by God (WSC #11)
- God is carrying out the redemption of his people through Christ

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Christian Epistemology

- Van Til notes (with regard to philosophical thought):

Modern thought is largely preoccupied with the theory of knowledge. DOF, pg. 55

- In other words, metaphysics is not as important in modern thought (especially since Kant) because man believes he only has direct access to the noumenal realm - but we *do* have access to reality through God's revelation

Christian Epistemology

- The most important point for a Christian epistemology is that

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It is needless to say that this procedure will appear suicidal to most men who study philosophy.

DOF, pg. 56

- The issue is authority! Did God really say?

Christian Epistemology

- How do we know the Bible is a legitimate ultimate standard?
- If we think we can start from a “neutral” position and decide, we are wrong
- By definition, a “neutral” position means that we must weigh the evidence and decide what our ultimate standard should be – which means that we have already decided! Our ultimate standard is ourselves!

Christian Epistemology

- Van Til points out that when Eve allowed herself to consider Satan's challenge to God's veracity she was *not* being neutral:

We should observe particularly that in doing what she did Eve did not really avoid the question of *What do we know?* She gave by implication a very definite answer to that question. She made a negation with respect to God's being. She denied God's being as ultimate being. She affirmed therewith in effect that all being is essentially on one level.

At the same time she also gave a definite answer to the question *How do we know?* She said we know independently of God. ... Thus she came to take the place of ultimate authority.

DOF, pg. 58

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At the same time she also gave a definite answer to the question *How do we know?* She said *we know independently of God.* ... Thus she came to take the *i.e. epistemology* authority.

Christian Epistemology

- Van Til makes the point that epistemology and metaphysics are inextricably linked – the Creator/creature distinction is fundamental to both

Christian Epistemology

- The linkage between metaphysics and epistemology is made clear when we consider God's knowledge of himself
 - Does he know himself exhaustively?
 - Does he have to wait to see what we will do and how he will respond?
 - Does he have to reflect on himself to understand himself?
- This is necessarily and radically different than how we know – the Creator/ creature distinction applies to epistemology too

Christian Epistemology

- Van Til says the following about God's knowledge:
As far as God's own person is concerned the subject is the object of knowledge. His knowledge of himself is therefore entirely analytical. DOF, pg. 60

Analytical knowledge, in distinction from synthetic knowledge, means knowledge that is not gained by reference to something that exists without [i.e., outside] the knower. God knows himself not by comparing and contrasting himself with anything, not even nonbeing, outside himself. He knows himself by one simple eternal act of vision. In God therefore the real is the rational and the rational is the real [*i.e.*, God is what he thinks and thinks what he is. fn 23] DOF, pg. 60

Christian Epistemology

- Similarly, as we saw last time, Van Til concludes that God's knowledge of creation is also analytical:

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

Isa 46:10 I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

Mat 10:29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.

Christian Epistemology

- Man's knowledge however is analogical rather than analytical
- Van Til's use of the word "analogical" has caused much confusion and conflict. He means that because of the Creator/creature distinction, our thinking and knowing are qualitatively different than God's even when we know the exact same content (e.g., $2 + 2 = 4$), we never know *exactly* as God knows anything

See AoHT, Chapter 7 and VA, pp 225-229

Christian Epistemology

- Because our thinking is on a qualitatively lower plane, it must be submitted to God's revelation
- We are made in God's image and

We are therefore like God so that our knowledge is true, and we are unlike God and therefore our knowledge can never be comprehensive. DOF, pg. 64
- In particular, our knowledge of God, while never comprehensive, is nonetheless true knowledge (to the extent it is biblical)

Christian Epistemology

- Van Til then discusses our knowledge of creation
 - Because all of creation exists for God's glory and all of it is part of his eternal plan, which we can never know fully, we can also never fully understand the physical creation
 - Because our knowledge will never be comprehensive, we should expect that there will be paradoxes as we discussed last time

Christian Epistemology

- What effect does sin have on human knowledge?
- The effect is not metaphysical – we remain creatures made in God’s image
- But sin is pervasive, it “involved every aspect of man’s personality.” DOF, pg. 70

Christian Epistemology

- Van Til says:

Christian-theism says that there are two levels of thought, the absolute and the derivative. Christian theism says that there are two levels of interpreters, God who interprets absolutely and man who must be the re-interpreter of God's interpretation. Christian-theism says that human thought is therefore analogical of God's thought. In opposition to all this, non-Christian thought holds in effect that the distinction between absolute and derivative thought must be wiped out. To be sure, God's thoughts may be more comprehensive than ours, but it [sic] is not self-complete without ours. This means that as all being was thought of as equally ultimate, so now all thought is thought of as equally ultimate.

DOF, pp 70-71

Christian Epistemology

- Therefore, Van Til says that non-Christians believe that human thought is “univocal” rather than analogical
- The difference between univocal and analogical thought is a major emphasis in Van Til’s epistemology, so let’s define univocal (he does *not* mean the same thing as Aquinas meant by it)

- univocal is “reasoning in which man is assumed to be the final or ultimate reference point of predication” VA, pg. 251
- It is thinking in which “We do not think God’s thoughts after him, but together with God we think out thoughts that have never been thought either by God or by man.” DOF, pg. 71
- It “does not honor the Creator-creature distinction, but assumes that God and man approach knowing in the same way and under essentially the same conditions. It refuses to ‘think God’s thoughts after Him’ and asserts its intellectual autonomy.” VA, pg. 468 fn 12
- It “presupposes human autonomy and renounces proper submission to divine authority.” AoHT, pg. 92
- It “starts with the assumption that man and the universe are entities from which, as ultimate starting point, we can reason to God.” ST, pg. 178

Christian Epistemology

- Therefore, in addition to having a two-circle view of metaphysics, Van Til has a two-circle view of epistemology
- But – and this is a key point (stated in my words) – man's epistemology depends on whether or not he has been born again, because that changes his most fundamental presuppositions (Jn 3:3,5, 1 Cor 2:14)

Christian Epistemology

- Van Til concludes by noting:

All this makes the matter of apologetical argument very complicated. Only a clear recognition of ... the total inability of the nonregenerate consciousness of itself to accept the truth of Christianity, and of the necessity of a consistent presentation of the Christian position together with firm reliance on the grace of God, can help us to reason fruitfully with men.

DOF, pg. 73