

WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH, CHAPTER 1:
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE APOLOGETIC METHOD OF CORNELIUS VAN TIL

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Abstract

Presents a study of the relationship between the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1 and the apologetic method of Cornelius Van Til. Van Til self-consciously sought to defend this Reformed system of doctrine in his apologetic and polemical encounters. Offers here an argument for the inchoate methodological foundations of Van Til's method in Chapter 1, On Holy Scripture, particularly with regard to the divines' treatment of natural and special revelation. Surveys each paragraph of Chapter 1, examining how the presuppositional commitment of the divines to the self-attesting, supreme authority of Holy Scripture is reflected and applied in the realm of apologetics by Van Til. Seeks to contribute to the discussion of the consistency of Van Tilian apologetics and the Westminster Standards.

Introduction

The obvious must be stated outright: the Westminster Confession of Faith is neither an apologetic treatise nor a how-to manual on the defense of the faith. Nonetheless, as a positive presentation of doctrine confessed by the Westminster divines, it does provide us with a glimpse into their foundational, epistemological commitments, or presuppositions. This paper will examine whether the apologetic method of Cornelius Van Til is consistent with the Westminster Standards to which he subscribed as a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. This is an important question because Van Til self-consciously sought to apply confessional Reformed theology to the realm of apologetics. In his foundational work *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til claims, "Now the basic structure of my thought is very simple. I have never been called upon to work out any form of systematic theology. My business is to teach apologetics. I therefore presuppose the Reformed system of doctrine. I try to show my students that it is this system of

doctrine that men need.¹ In the introduction that same work, he defines the sources of the Reformed system of doctrine in three-fold, hierarchical fashion: 1) The Holy Scriptures, taken as the infallible Word of God, as the ultimate criterion; 2) The Reformed confessions as the secondary, subordinate criterion; and finally, 3) the works of other great Reformed theologians.²

The consistency of Van Til's apologetic method with the second of these sources will be the subject of this essay. The narrow consideration of Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1, Of the Holy Scripture³ is theologically-motivated, for the whole of Van Til's apologetic presupposes the self-attesting, self-explanatory Christ of Scripture, not only in regards to the proper diagnosis of the unbelieving condition, but also the interpretation of all of reality; thus, it is fitting to examine the apologetic implications of the Confession of Faith at the very heart of the matter, and to determine whether Van Til understood and applied them faithfully.⁴

The Priority of the Doctrine of the Holy Scripture

Before delving into the content of Chapter 1, itself, attention must be devoted to its placement within the whole Confession if we are to appreciate its full significance. While the centrality of Scripture as the authoritative, inspired Word of God was acknowledged by all of the great Protestant confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the WCF distinguishes

¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed., ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 27.

² *Ibid.*, 1-2. Van Til lists among the great Reformed writers, firstly, John Calvin, followed more recently by Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, and Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield. He argues that such men have become authoritative representatives of classical Reformed thought, and therefore, to differ from them is a "serious matter."

³ I will be quoting from *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms: The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as Adopted by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church: With Proof Texts* (Willow Grove, PA: The Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005).

⁴ Cornelius Van Til, "My Credo" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan, (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 21. In one of his most mature statements on his apologetic method, Van Til declared as the first proposition for a consistently Christian methodology of apologetics, "That we use the same principle in apologetics that we use in theology: the self-attesting, self-explanatory Christ of Scripture."

itself by “how refined and how explicit this base of authority is made *from the outset*.”⁵ Warfield has memorably commented regarding its excellence: “There is certainly in the whole mass of confessional literature no more nobly conceived or ably wrought out statement of doctrine than the chapter “Of the Holy Scripture,” which the Westminster Divines placed at the head of their Confession and laid at the foundation of their system of doctrine.”⁶ Although it is by no means the only confession of this era to begin with the doctrine of Scripture, its extensive treatment makes the primacy of the chapter On the Holy Scripture all the more apparent.⁷

But why begin with the doctrine of Scripture? And more specifically in light of our present study, what implications does this have for apologetics? The chronological precedence of the doctrine of Holy Scripture over that of the Holy Trinity must not be misconstrued so as to suggest that Scripture is exalted over God. Sinclair Ferguson provides helpful clarification through his insight that this is an epistemological—not ontological—primacy.⁸ Instead of dishonoring the ontological Trinity with the ordering of their Confession, the divines acknowledge the priority that God himself places on the Holy Scriptures as the covenantally-appointed means by which he gives knowledge of himself to man. When the Holy Spirit reveals himself to his people, he does so by, with, and through the Word.⁹ In other words, the Bible is

⁵ David W. Hall, *Windows on Westminster: A Look at the Men, the Work and the Enduring Results of the Westminster Assembly (1643-1648)* (Norcross, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1993), 59 (emphasis added).

⁶ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931).

⁷ Most notably among the other confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to begin with Scripture are the First Helvetic Confession (1536), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), The Formula of Concord (1576), and most importantly, the Irish Articles of Religion (1615), upon which the outline and language of the WCF has likely been modeled in numerous places. See Hall, *Windows on Westminster*, 61; Sinclair Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 3 - Chapter One*, podcast audio, The Westminster Standards, MP3, 47:41, accessed November 10, 2014. <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/the-westminster-standards/id533896327?mt=10>

⁸ Sinclair Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 3 - Chapter One*. Aside from the epistemological concerns of the divines, which are more pertinent to this essay, the historical context of polemic with the Roman Catholic Church over textual criticism and its implications for interpretation may also play a role in the WCF’s priority of Scripture. See Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context*, The Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 120-122.

⁹ Cf. WCF 1.5;10.

not an independent attestation to God, outside of God, but God's own self-attestation as his very Word.

The chronological precedence of the doctrine of Scripture to the doctrine of God establishes God's Word as the necessary presupposition of anything that can be rightly said about God. Scripture is the foundation upon which the divines' words back to God are based, and they are only true in so much as they conform to God's self-revelation in His inscripturated Word. If WCF "On the Holy Scripture" is a faithful restatement about what the Bible says about itself and its own authority, then everything that follows—if consistent—must be the restatement of what the Bible's Author says about himself and all things necessary for life and godliness. By making God's Word the foundation of their confession, the divines imply that true knowledge is not man-derived, but God-derived.

Regarding apologetic principles, Chapter 1 reminds the apologist that the faith to be defended is not in a generic, nondescript, deity, but rather the Triune God of the Bible. The God of the divines is not him, her, or it of general theism, fabricated according to the ignorant fancy of man, but the God of the Bible who defines himself on his own terms. Still neither do the divines confess faith in the strong *possibility* or *probability* of "a god," but rather they presuppose the True and Living God of the Scriptures. Their method coheres with what Van Til would later advocate as "reasoning by presupposition," which he defines as "indicating what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one's method. The Reformed apologist will frankly admit that his own methodology presupposes the truth of Christian theism."¹⁰ While the "frank admission" of the divines' will come in the actual text of

¹⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Pub, 2003) 128.

the confession, the presupposition of the God of the Bible is already implied by the confessional priority of the doctrine of Holy Scripture over that of God.¹¹

The necessity and finality of Scripture: 1.1

The concessive statement on the adequacy and insufficiency of general revelation that opens the Chapter 1 is significant for understanding the divines' view of the necessity and finality of inscripturated, special revelation. The "light of nature" also occurs in WCF 21.1, and while it is nowhere defined exactly, it appears to refer to the inward revelation of God to all of his image-bearers, which remains inescapably imprinted upon man even after the fall. The proof text for this clause in the confession, Romans 2:14-15, gives further credence to the notion that inward consciousness of God is specifically in view, here.¹² Nonetheless, as WCF 21.1 indicates, the internal character of the "light of nature" in no way diminishes the clarity of God's general revelation: "The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might." Indeed, it is the same God, in his goodness, wisdom and power who is declared plainly through the light of nature and also in his works of Creation and Providence.

Per the Confession, which clearly draws from Paul's teaching in Romans¹³ for paragraph 1, the knowledge conveyed by the light of nature and the works of creation and providence has serious implications for the Creator-creature relationship, for all men not only know that God exists, but also that he is 1) sovereign Lord over all; 2) good in his very nature and does good to

¹¹ See below for a longer discussion of the inseparability of facts from their meaning, the necessity of defending Christian theism as a unit, and the importance of reasoning by way of presupposition.

¹² Although the proof texts of the WCF were added in 1647 subsequent to its completion and only "reluctantly" upon the order of the House of Commons, they do provide some insight for exegetes of the Confession. See Letham, *The Westminster Assembly, 107, 175*; Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work, 102, 103*.

¹³ See esp. Rom 1:19-20, 32; 2:1, 14-15.

all; and 3) worthy of unconditional worship that is his due from all men. General revelation leaves no doubt as to who this God is and what he requires of man. More than “offering a vague sense that there is some kind of God,” natural revelation reveals the True and Living God of Christian Theism with such clarity and authority so as to leave all men without excuse for their failure to obey and worship him.¹⁴

Despite the objective reality and clarity of general revelation, the divines assert that it is insufficient to bring man to salvation. The impotence of natural revelation is not due, however, to any inadequacy in creation itself, but rather because its purpose was revelatory and not restorative.¹⁵ Van Til would argue, following the divines’ notion of the necessity of God’s voluntary condescension due to the creator-creature distinction,¹⁶ special revelation, or “thought communication on the part of God” was necessary not only after the fall, but also before it.¹⁷ He writes in *The Defense of the Faith*:

Even in paradise, Adam had to regard all the facts of his natural environment in the light of the goal that God set for man in his supernatural revelation. After the entrance of sin God in his grace revealed his place of redemption for man and the universe. And it is this supernatural-redemptive revelation that we find inscripturated in the Bible. It is therefore not to depreciate natural revelation to say that it must, to be understood aright, be seen in terms of the system of truth revealed in Scripture. And Scripture in turn cannot be seen for what it is except it be by the testimony of the Holy Spirit enabling man to see the Bible, and therewith natural revelation, in their true light.¹⁸

If even pre-lapsarian Adam was incapable of understanding nature and the terms of his probation apart from special revelation, then how much more does fallen man require special revelation to

¹⁴ Chad B. Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader’s Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh, Scotland ; Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 4.

¹⁵ Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 3 - Chapter One*.

¹⁶ WCF 7.1: The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 3 - Chapter One*. Ferguson safeguards against an erroneous view of the nature of Scripture’s necessity: “the necessity of scripture does not lie in anything as it were related to the needs of God ontologically, but it is rather a logical, practical necessity for man if man is to enjoy salvation.”

¹⁸ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 205; cf. Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 137.

interpret himself, the rest of creation, and his Creator?¹⁹ In his introduction to Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of The Bible*, Van Til describes the necessity of Scripture especially in light of the noetic effects of the Fall,²⁰ which prevent man from correctly interpreting the facts of the universe as God himself has defined them according to his own authoritative interpretation:

In practice, this means that, since sin has come into the world, God's interpretation of the facts must come in finished, written form and be comprehensive in character. God continues to reveal himself in the facts of the created world but the sinner needs to interpret every one of them in the light of Scripture. Every thought on every subject must become obedient to the requirement of God as he speaks in his Word.²¹

For Van Til, however, the necessity and finality of special revelation in no way undermines the necessity or perspicuity of general revelation. They must not be placed in conflict with one another, for they both reveal the same God; although nature does not speak of saving grace, it does reveal the "God of saving grace."²² They are united in the sense that they both "presuppose and supplement" one another as part of God's "one grand scheme of covenant-revelation of himself to man."²³ Natural revelation not only serves as the covenantal stage for the redemptive work of God in history, mediating special revelation, it continues to reveal God—now in his wrath—even after the fall. Van Til summarizes in his essay "Nature and Scripture," "At every stage in history, God's revelation in nature is sufficient for the purpose it was meant to serve, that of being the playground for the process of differentiation between those who would and those who would not serve God."²⁴ This process of differentiation would be carried out

¹⁹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 137.

²⁰ Cf. WCF 6: Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, "Introduction," in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 22.

²² Cornelius Van Til, Response to Jack B. Rogers' "Van Til and Warfield on Scripture in the Westminster Confessions" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, E. R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 166; Cf. Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture" in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium*, ed. Ned Bernard Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 3rd rev. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 266-267.

²³ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁴ Van Til, "Nature and Scripture," 276.

according to the special, redemptive revelation of God until eschatological glory.

In the conclusion of paragraph 1, the divines offer a final reason for the necessity of inscripturated, special revelation: the “former ways” have ceased.²⁵ Because God’s former modes of special revelation, (e.g. theophany, prophecy, and miracle), have definitely ceased, God has committed the revelation of himself and his will to writing for the Church. The divines clearly assert the Bible as the self-revelation of God; he himself reveals the Bible, and he reveals himself through the Bible.²⁶ This revelation—and not the revelation of nature, which itself groans to be set free from its bondage—is able to make the church wise unto salvation.

The implications for apologetics are myriad in this foundational paragraph of the Confession. First and foremost, it establishes that all men know the God of the Bible. They are inescapably confronted by the authoritative evidence of the existence of the Triune God of the Bible from within themselves and throughout every facet of the created order. To defend the truth in such a way so as to discount the objective reality of God as revealed in nature and Scripture is to join fallen man in his rebellion against God. It is to partake in the folly of him who suppresses the truth of the God that he knows exists. Van Til explains that the objective revelation of God in nature and the consciousness of man is sufficiently clear to inescapably impress upon man the knowledge of God, but due to his spiritual, “ethical deadness,” he does not know truly that which “he knows and cannot help but know.”²⁷ The natural man knows God, but not as he *ought*.

²⁵ Cf. Heb 1:1-2: Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (ESV).

²⁶ Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 5.

²⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1954), 245.

This creaturely knowledge of God that is common to all image-bearers is the point of contact between the believer and unbeliever, yet the non-Reformed apologist fails to argue exclusively on this solid ground. Per Van Til, instead of presenting the facts as they are—that all men know that they have rebelled against their Creator—the Romanist and Arminian appeal to things in the created order (e.g. facts, reason, laws, etc.) as if the creature can rightly interpret them apart from presupposing the Creator who is himself revealed in every aspect of nature.²⁸ Instead of demanding that the unbeliever think analogically as a covenant-creature—acknowledging that “his own interpretation of nature must therefore be a reinterpretation of what is already fully interpreted by God”²⁹—they allow him to persist in his self-deluded rebellion against the God he knows exists.

Such an approach betrays a deep mistrust of the power of the Holy Spirit to regenerate sinners and a fundamental misunderstanding of the continuity between natural and special revelation as belonging to the same Triune God: “It is no easier for the sinner to accept God’s revelation in nature than to accept God’s revelation in Scripture . . . it is therefore the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts that alone effects the required Copernican revolution and makes us both Christians and theists.”³⁰ For Van Til, the Roman Catholic and Arminian apologists mold their apologetic to suit the natural man instead of relying on the Holy Spirit and trusting that “By the gift of the Holy Spirit alone, sinners are able to observe the fact that all nature, including *even their own negative attitude toward God*, is revelational of God, the God of Scripture.”³¹ Men in their sinful nature, which has become a part of nature, reveal God both in his just wrath against sin and also in his mercy to not yet punish men to the full degree

²⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 131.

²⁹ Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 278.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 280.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 281 (emphasis mine).

that they deserve. For Van Til, trying to prove God to unbelievers is impossible apart from presupposing the truths of God and his revelation which they already reject: “No proof for this God and for the truth of his revelation in Scripture can be offered by an appeal to anything in human experiences that has not itself received its light from the God whose existence and whose revelation it is supposed to prove.”³² In the end, any misguided appeal to neutral facts in nature is confounded by the fact that no man is a neutral interpreter of God; he is either a covenant-keeper in Christ or a covenant-breaker in Adam. The supernatural work of the Holy Spirit by the Word is indispensable to the apologist because natural revelation both inside and outside of unbelieving man proves the very God whom he denies. The only God-honoring “proof” for God, therefore, becomes the positive presentation of the internal consistency of the Biblical worldview and the demonstration of the impossibility of the contrary.

The canon of Scripture: 1.2, 1.3

While paragraph 2 might appear on the surface as an “aid to a Bible memory challenge,” the listing of the entire canon of Old and New Testament books is a serious polemical statement against the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches, both of which had already deemed the Apocrypha as canonical or pious reading in their confessional statements.³³ In contrast, the divines assert that only the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments are uniquely set apart as the very writing of God. Moreover, these paragraphs establish the divines’ principle of canonicity: inspiration. That which belongs to the canon of Scripture is God-breathed, and therefore can be trusted as a rule of faith and life. It is significant that the divines do not define what inspiration

³² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 131.

³³ Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 3 - Chapter One*.

looks like outside of being “given by God.” In this sense, the inspiration of Scripture is self-attesting and cannot be proven apart from its Divine author.³⁴

The Authority of Scripture: 1.4, 1.5

The guiding presupposition of paragraphs 4 and 5 is that the Holy Scripture is to be received as the Word of God because it *is* the Word of God.³⁵ Thom Notaro insightfully comments on the circularity of this statement: “Though this confessional point may seem hopelessly circular, it is far from hopeless, though it is unavoidably circular.”³⁶ Unable to appeal to any higher authority than God himself, nor find any greater reason for obeying and believing that authority (he is truth itself), the divines are obliged to present the authority of the Word of God as self-attesting. As evidenced by the long list of Scripture’s impressive attributes, effects, and even doctrines³⁷ the divines were in no way ignorant of the manifold evidence that could be put forth to establish the authority of the Scriptures. But they relegate it to subordinate status as mere corroborating evidence by means of a single adverb: “notwithstanding.”³⁸ The divines could have theoretically made a strong case for the authority of Scripture even according to so-called “secular” standards—strong, of course because God has providentially ordained the means by which the Scriptures were inspired, written, received, and preserved in history. They chose, instead, to ground their full persuasion and assurance of the authority of the Scriptures in the self-attestation of God. Their reception of the authority of Scripture rests not upon any testimony of any man, or

³⁴ This point, along with the apologetic implications of the authority of Scripture as being the Word of God will be addressed at length in our discussion of paragraphs 4 and 5 of the Confession.

³⁵ As their proof text would suggest, the divines have clearly borrowed the language of the apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 2:13: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (ESV). I have purposely paraphrased paragraph 4 so as to point out its circularity, which will be discussed below in regards to ultimate authority in Van Til’s apologetic.

³⁶ Notaro, “A Confessional Apologetic,” 161.

³⁷ WCF 1.5: “the testimony of the church to an high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture. And the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole (which is, to give all glory to God), the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof...”

³⁸ WCF 1.5.

church,³⁹ but the testimony of the Holy Spirit working by and with the Word; their acceptance rests upon the “two infallible witnesses of the Spirit and the Word” speaking concurrently in a single voice to the regenerate heart.⁴⁰

Perhaps more than any other paragraph in Chapter 1, paragraph 5 concretely applies the presuppositionalism of the divines. Following their example, Van Til has rightly argued the necessity of keeping one’s ultimate commitment ultimate, for to prove the ultimate authority of something by another authority is elevate the latter over the former, resulting in inconsistency. “All reasoning is by nature “circular” in that “the starting point, the method, and the conclusion are always involved in one another.”⁴¹ Van Til exposes any Christian apologetic that does not presuppose its conclusion, namely, the Truth of the Triune God and His Word, in its method itself as wholly inconsistent and self-contradictory: “[Christian theology and apologetics] has sought to prove the existence of God and the propriety or necessity of believing in the Bible as the Word of God by arguments that assumed the possibility of sound and true interpretation without God and without the Bible.”⁴²

While it is unsurprising that the divines contrast their criteria for obeying and believing Holy Scripture with that of Rome, it is quite telling that they dismiss even the individual pieces of internal evidence that spring from the Scriptures themselves, e.g. its efficacy, majesty, unity, etc. They refuse to consider Christianity as anything less than a whole unit. For example, the divines seem to understand the impossibility of arguing for the excellency of Scripture apart from acknowledging more fundamentally the excellency of their divine author; the very excellency of the Scripture rests upon the prior, exhaustive knowledge of God from whom the

³⁹ The divines clearly have the Church of Rome in view, here.

⁴⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 4 - Scripture*.

⁴¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 130.

⁴² Van Til, “Introduction,” 20.

divines' knowledge of its excellency is derived. In contrast to the Arminian and Roman Catholic "block-house methodology,"⁴³ which is the piecing together of individual truths that cannot cohere unless the truth of Christian theism is presupposed, the divines treatment of Scripture is an example of arguing for Christian theism as a whole. They seek to be analogous to God in all their thinking; they submit their reason to the revelation of God which is always authoritative.⁴⁴

Per Van Til, to proceed upon any other grounds would be to "wipe out the creator-creature distinction" and assume that we can know things as they truly are, as exhaustively as God does, which is the non-Christian requirement of reason.⁴⁵ Such a leap of intellectual autonomy assumes not only an "open" world in which there are "brute," uninterpreted facts to be freely, originally defined by autonomous man, but paradoxically, a "closed" world, as well, in which their God-given interpretation cannot be accepted.⁴⁶ In reality, however, there are no brute facts to be known apart from their context in the larger system of God's created order, wherein God's interpretation of them is authoritatively revealed to us in Holy Scripture.⁴⁷

The facts of history and their principle of interpretation are "interdependent,"⁴⁸ meaning that even the resurrection—which is the most basic argument of the evidentialist for the Christian faith—can only be understood with the Biblical worldview, which already presupposes the meaning of the resurrection. Van Til concisely states that "it is a contradiction in terms to speak of presenting certain facts to men unless one presents them as parts of this system [of Christian theism]."⁴⁹ Through the mock encounter of Mr. White, the Reformed Christian, and Mr. Black,

⁴³ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 136-143.

⁴⁴ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 140.

⁴⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *Faith, Reason, and Theistic Proofs*, podcast audio, The History and Nature of Apologetics, MP3, 55:20, accessed December 10, 2014, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/history-nature-apologetics/id430339495?mt=10>

⁴⁶ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 65-66.

⁴⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 166.

⁴⁸ Van Til, "Introduction," 7.

⁴⁹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 193-194.

the unbeliever, he illustrates the necessity of presupposing Christian theism when presenting any fact:

It is this that the Reformed Christian, Mr. White, would tell Mr. Black. In the very act of presenting the resurrection of Christ, or in the very act of presenting any other fact of historic Christianity, Mr. White would be presenting it as authoritatively interpreted in the Bible. He would argue that unless Mr. Black is willing to set the facts of history in the framework of the meaning authoritatively ascribed to them in the Bible, he will make gobble-de-gook of history.⁵⁰

Meaninglessness or “gobble-de-gook” results when man rejects the final reference point, who renders any fact or law intelligible: the self-attesting ontological Trinity of Scripture. He is man’s “ultimate environment” who interprets himself, man, and all of Creation.⁵¹ Only when the Resurrection of Christ is viewed as it truly is in God’s system can man interpret its true significance. Apart from it, there is no solid basis on which to differentiate Christ’s resurrection from the resurrection of Lazarus; there is no coherent way to solve the problem of the one and the many by distinguishing the particular from the particular and the particular from the universal.⁵² More provocatively stated, apart from the presupposition of the sovereign, Triune God of the Bible, there would be no legitimate grounds upon which to differentiate the resurrection of Christ from the death of Christ. To present this most glorious truth by means of a direct appeal to the facts—as if they existed in a Godless universe—is to submit the Risen Son of God to be defined and interpreted by sinful man according to his own rebellious, incoherent worldview, which can account for nothing at all.

The Sufficiency of Scripture: WCF 1.6

Having earlier argued for the adequacy and perspicuity of natural revelation—adequate

⁵⁰ Cornelius Van Til, “The Authority of Scripture,” *Torch and Trumpet* 1, no. 4 (1951): 16ff., accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/vantil/van-til-collection-of-articles-from-1950-1959.pdf>

⁵¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 66.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 47-48.

to reveal God due to its objective clarity, but insufficient to bring fallen men to saving knowledge of God—the divines establish in WCF I.6, 7 the adequacy and perspicuity of Scripture to fulfill the redemptive purposes of God for His glory and man’s salvation, faith and life. Because of the Scripture’s sufficiency, the divines argue against any sort of continuing revelation. A two-pronged polemic may be in view, here: 1) firstly against the rising influence of mystic groups such as the Seekers or other forerunners of the Quakers, who claimed “inner light” or direct revelation from the Spirit; and 2) in refutation of the Roman Catholic view of the necessity of the Church as the infallible interpreter of Scripture.⁵³ In contrast to these groups that would render the Scriptures somehow lacking, the divines assert the finality of God’s revelation through his Word and the necessity of the Holy Spirit for its illumination unto the saving knowledge of men.

Without dismissing the complexity and diversity of the Scriptures, the divines defend their authority and sufficiency as the rule of faith and life even over matters that they do not directly address. This is acknowledged even in the worship of God: “There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.”⁵⁴ Indeed, the very means—the light of nature and Christian prudence—by which the Christian is to address matters which are neither expressly set down in Scripture nor deducible by good and necessary consequence from Scripture are themselves to be governed according to then general rules of Scripture. For the divines, the all-encompassing authority of Scripture is such that man cannot

⁵³ Sinclair Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 4 - Scripture*, podcast audio, The Westminster Standards, MP3, 42:46, accessed November 10, 2014, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/itunes-u/the-westminster-standards/id533896327?mt=10>.

⁵⁴ WCF 1.6

permit himself to be “indifferent” to Scripture regarding “things indifferent.”⁵⁵ According to G.I. Williamson, the exhaustive and authoritative reach of the principles of Scripture demands that image-bearers of God apply the Word to their individual circumstances; “this necessitates Christian liberty, but one that is fenced by the inviolable, fundamental values of God’s Law expressed in his Word.”⁵⁶

The Confession’s teaching on the application of Scripture has clear implications for apologetics: even if Scripture were absolutely silent on the apologetic method, one would still be obliged to observe its “general rules” when defending the faith. At the very least, the basic principle of Sovereign Lordship of Christ over all things, for example, would have to factor into one’s encounter with unbelief.⁵⁷ It is perhaps in this area where the teachings of Van Til most decisively contributed to a distinctly biblical, Reformed apologetic method, consistent in its starting point and methodology.

In full agreement with the Westminster divines on this matter, Van Til pushed the principle to its logical, Biblical extension: the authority of the Scriptures over every aspect of life must necessarily include the realm of thought and knowledge itself.⁵⁸ Following our discussion above of Van Til’s notion of the covenantal character of all God’s revelation, both natural and special, we now return to its application on man’s thinking. On the basis of the covenant relationship between God and man, Van Til asserts the morality and religiousness of every thought and act: “Always and everywhere, in whatever he does and thinks as a scientist,

⁵⁵ Sinclair Ferguson, *Westminster Standards 4*.

⁵⁶ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith, for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 11-12.

⁵⁷ Thankfully, God has not left us without clear directions for defending the faith. My understatement above were meant to shock the reader with the inconsistency of Christian apologists who cast aside the most basic truths of the Bible (e.g. the sovereignty of God, the objective clarity of his revelation, the folly and deception of unbelief, etc.) in order to appeal to the unbeliever.

⁵⁸ The Biblical motivation for submission to the Lordship of Christ even in the realm of rational thought can be found throughout Scripture: Prov 1:7; 2:5; Job 28:28; 1 Cor 1:18-2:16; 2 Cor 10:5; Col 2:8, etc.

philosopher, or theologian, whether learned or unlearned, man acts either as a covenant-keeper or a covenant-breaker.”⁵⁹ The Fall of Man was a moral, intellectual rebellion, which sought to conceive of reality as somehow independent of God: “When man fell, he denied the naturally revelatory nature of every fact, including his own consciousness, and assumed that his consciousness was revelational only of himself, and not God.”⁶⁰ Indeed, eating of the forbidden fruit in the garden was man’s acceptance of Satan’s invitation to make himself “the final reference point of all predication”⁶¹

With this view of the covenantal necessity of thinking God’s thoughts after him, Van Til demonstrates that Adam’s rebellion cannot be reduced to a mere “religious” error, as if religion could be compartmentalized and disconnected from the rest of one’s life, for it was rather an inescapably *religious* thought in which man sought to cast down the authority of His Creator and Covenant Lord whose Word upholds and interprets all reality. In doing so, man crafted for himself the idol of self in the form of autonomous knowledge; that is, knowledge independent from the exhaustive, self-contained knowledge of God as its ultimate reference point.⁶² For Van Til, the confessional idea that Scripture holds authority over all aspects of life has massive implications for the apologetic encounter. Firstly, it shatters the myth of neutrality by maintaining that “the intellectual is ethical.”⁶³ Every act of autonomous reason is a thought-crime against the Creator in which man persists in the sin of Adam by refusing to think God’s thoughts after him. John Frame credits Van Til with a revolution in the philosophy of knowledge comparable in magnitude to the Kantian revolution of the modern period:

⁵⁹ Van Til, Response to Jack B. Rogers’ “Warfield and Van Til,” 167.

⁶⁰ Van Til, “Nature and Scripture,” 280.

⁶¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 115.

⁶² Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 42.

⁶³ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*., 71.

If Kant taught secular unbelievers the essentials of their (until then subconscious) theory of knowledge, Van Til did the same for the Christian. While Kant said that we must completely avoid bowing before an external authority, Van Til taught that the only way to find truth is to bow before God's authoritative Scripture. This is Van Til's distinctive contribution to modern theology. Because of Van Til, we can at last define the essential philosophical differences between the Christian and the non-Christian worldviews.⁶⁴

The idea of intellectual neutrality is definitely shattered with Van Til; whether to God or the idol of self (man's autonomous reason), all men must bow. The Christian apologist, therefore, cannot leave his own Christian worldview at the door in order to gain credibility with an unbeliever unless he wants to also abandon obedience to the Triune God. There is no middle ground, for every method, in spite of the claim to neutrality, "presupposes the truth or the falsity of Christian theism."⁶⁵

Van Til allowed this notion to pervade his entire apologetic system, positing that at the foundation of it all, there are truly only two philosophical viewpoints: Christian and non-Christian. As such, he argues in *A Christian Theology of Knowledge* that every human thought can be placed into one of two antithetical categories:

There are many schools of philosophy with which the college student has to make his acquaintance. The textbooks speak of some of them as objective and of others as subjective. Some are spoken of as monistic and others as pluralistic. Some are said to be pantheistic and others deistic, some rationalist and others irrationalist. Recently we have existential, analytical and positivist systems of philosophy. But all these schools must be seen in the light of the analysis made of them in Scripture. The main question that can be asked about any system of thought is whether it is man-centered or God-centered. Does it make the Creator-Redeemer or the creature the final reference point in prediction? If an answer to this question is found, then the problematics presented by the various schools of philosophy become intelligent to us.⁶⁶

With this framework, it is coherent that the divines would presuppose the necessity of observing

⁶⁴ John M. Frame, "Cornelius Van Til," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1993), 156-67, accessed December 6, 2014, <http://www.frame-poythress.org/cornelius-van-til/>.

⁶⁵ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 129.

⁶⁶ Van Til, *A Christian Theology of Knowledge*, 49.

Biblical principles in all areas of life.⁶⁷ Van Til illustrates this particularly well in regards to science, which is often pitted against theism. He explains that while one would go to the laboratory and not the pages of Scripture to study snake anatomy, one wouldn't understand snake anatomy rightly apart from the Bible.⁶⁸ This is because modern science is not built upon the Christian worldview, which alone can account for the uniformity in nature that is presupposed in any hypothesis, observation, or conclusion that the scientist makes about snakes.⁶⁹ Moreover, the non-Christian scientist would also encounter the problem of the one and the many which would prevent him from even the most basic task of counting: "Even the mere counting of particular things presupposes a system of truth of which these particulars form a part. Without such a system of truth there would be no distinguishable difference between one particular and another. They would be as impossible to distinguish from one another as the millions of drops of water in the ocean would be indistinguishable from one another by the naked eye."⁷⁰ The meaninglessness of reality apart from God thus requires that the Christian apologist challenge the unbeliever at the level of their ultimate epistemological commitments.

Scripture as the Word of the Supreme Judge: 1.7, 1.8, 1.9, 1.10

These final paragraphs of WCF Chapter 1 continue to build upon the theological foundations laid by the divines: the divine Author of Scripture has necessarily revealed himself clearly in His Word; the contents of His Word, which are kept wholly from error and discontinuity by virtue that their author is truth itself, are self-interpreting; and as the very Word of God written, the Holy Scripture is the supreme judge of all controversies of religion. Once again, Van Til's assertion that self-contained God is the final point of reference in all

⁶⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 169-170.

⁶⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 20.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁷⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 137.

interpretation is relevant, here, for the “facts are what they are, in the last analysis, by virtue of the place they take in the plan of God.”⁷¹ For Van Til, God as the supreme judge of all interpretation of reality is rooted in his sovereignty and omniscience, making the interpretation of all things on the part of man a submissive exercise in reinterpreting “the interpretation of God by which facts are what they are.”⁷² Any apologetic method that discounts what God has spoken with clarity and finality in Scripture is to assert oneself as the supreme judge over against the only, living, and true God.

Conclusion and Areas for Further Study

WCF Chapter 1, Of the Holy Scripture implicitly—though by no means unclear—establishes a presuppositional commitment to the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. What the confession sets forth in principle in the realm of theology, Van Til applies in practice to the diverse context of unbelief. In other words, the divines express in inchoate form, the apologetic directives that are presupposed by Van Til and given broader application.⁷³ For those who subscribe to the Westminster Standards, covenantal apologetics may therefore be called “confessional apologetics.” This is significant because “inasmuch as the confession, as a subordinate standard, is faithful to biblical revelation, it warrants application to all realms of life, including what we believe and say in apologetics.”⁷⁴ If, however, it has been argued convincingly that Van Til's apologetic method is consistent with Confession's doctrine of

⁷¹ Van Til, “Introduction,” 18.

⁷² Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*.

⁷³ The consistency of other apologetic methods with the WCF has not been examined in the paper. However, seeing as how their epistemological commitment to the Lordship of Christ and His Word is not presupposed in their methodology—while it is in the WCF in terms of justifying the authority it claims for the Scriptures—the faithfulness of other methods to the Confession and the Word of God may be called into question. There are a number of excellent sources on this subject, which should be commended for interacting not with straw men, but those who hold the same confessional, Reformed theology: Greg Bahnsen, “A Critique of ‘Classical Apologetics,’” *Presbyterian Journal* 44, no. 32 (December 4, 1985); John M. Frame, “Van Til and the Ligonier Apologetic,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 47, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 479–99; William D. Dennison, “The Reason for God: A Review Article,” *Ordained Servant* 17 (2008): 146–51.

⁷⁴ Thom E. Notaro, “A Confessional Apologetic” in *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint and Lane G. Tipton (Phillipsburg, N.J: P & R Publishing, 2007), 162.

Scripture—by no means a novel idea—then this raises an important question: how does this square with the fact that the divines themselves were virtually all in the classical tradition that would become known as Old Princeton? Future studies should seek to establish whether or not Van Til's apologetic method is more consistent than that of the divines' themselves. In other words, did Van Til have a stronger, more faithful application of the doctrine of Scripture than the divines who penned it? And if so, then a final, perhaps even more provocative question may be explored as follows: Is Van Til's apologetic method, or something close to it, the *only* method consistent with the Westminster Standards?

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