

Van Til Made Me Reformed

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In one of his writings on romantic love, C. S. Lewis alludes to a man skulking through the streets looking for a woman. This, says Lewis, is not true love. True love seeks to have and to cherish, while lust only desires for itself. That would seem to be a coherent Christian statement, but Cornelius Van Til would have considered it to be inadequate. Was that man not a sinner in need of Jesus Christ? What is the difference between Christian and non-Christian love? Without a proper Christian context, Lewis's statement expresses merely an idealism not much different from refined paganism. Van Til said, "Ideals are like a highway in the sky. There are no entrance ramps."

The skulking predator would have to change his attitudes and behavior to comport with gentlemanly ideals. But for Van Til, Christians need a more consistent Christianity based upon the authoritative Scriptures, the Reformed faith, and the historic creeds of the church. The legacy of C. S. Lewis has been the diminution of theology. One of his famous followers, Elizabeth Elliot, once said, "If more people read C. S. Lewis, there would be less need for seminaries." Harvard professor Armand Nicoli maintains that Lewis's reasoning is based on God—but is this the God of the Bible or the God of Platonism? The tendency in many pulpits today is to portray theology as an addendum to Christian life, to treat doctrine as an unpleasantness and to regard action as the only test of faith.

I was once a thoroughgoing C. S. Lewis fan. I could quote his "Four Loves," the ideals and all the parallel failures of the ideals. I was certain that I was on the right track of intellectual discrimination. But someone dropped a brick on my head: "Van Til is against C. S. Lewis," he said.

"What are you trying to do to me?"

I replied with some anger. "You're ruining my life!"

"I'm only trying to teach you the historic Protestant faith," my friend replied. "I think you should go to Westminster Seminary."

Meeting Van Til

I arrived at Westminster in the fall of 1975. There I met Van Til himself—old, white-haired, having coffee and donuts in none other than a hall named after him. One day the ancient mariner grabbed me by the shoulder with his rough farmer's hand. "I'm Van Til," he roared, "Who are you? When I want to meet someone, I have to grab him. I have to abscond with a student now and then." I introduced myself, and he said, "You follow me." I followed him down to his library, a dusty, chicken-coop-like room in the basement of Machen Hall. There he began loading so many of his own books on my outstretched arms that I cried, "Stop!" I thought he was crazy. But I signed up for his final course, "The Theology of Karl Barth," and began my Westminster career.

I began reading Van Til's book, *The Defense of the Faith*, and found the introduction absolutely impenetrable. Then I came to this sentence:

The Christianity of Roman Catholic "supernatural theology" cannot be attached to the "theism" of its philosophy and natural theology without itself sinking in the bottomless pit of pure contingency.

"Mama mia! What am I to do with that?" I wondered. I went up to Van Til after class one day and said to him, "What you teach is very difficult for me." He said, "You're smarter than I am. If you don't understand it by the end of the term, I'll give you a thousand dollars. You have to work at it. Work at it; it'll clear up. If you don't work, then get out! Everybody has to work here."

I have been working on this passage for almost thirty years. Van Til was opposed to the philosophy of

Plato and Aristotle as guides to God. For instance, in a 1939 article he says :

Platonism itself, and not merely the excrescences that have grown out of it, is an enemy of Christianity. Its chief service in preparing the world for the coming of Christ, was, we firmly believe, a negative one. Platonism affords one of the greatest, if not the greatest historical example of what St. Paul speaks of in 1 Cor 1:20-21. Plato, in all phases of his thought, assumes the ultimacy of man. Fully recognizing the historical service tendered by Platonism we nevertheless maintain that there can be no peace between Platonism and Christianity, not even a truce, but only war.

If Rome built its theology on the natural reason of Plato, it would be similarly worthless—not a gospel at all, but the erection of a castle on the swamp of sinful human reasoning. What gospel Rome has is liable to fall into a bottomless pit of natural meaninglessness.

Learning from Van Til

I remember Van Til's class on Karl Barth. Diagrams were going up and down all over the blackboard. Pure flux and pure staticism were intertwining, interpenetrating, and coalescing. Confused students were asking questions. He used to say, "It's okay to ask dumb questions. What use is ignorance unless it shows?" Then one day he looked at me, and I thought he was talking to me. He said,

Total depravity. That means the whole glass is poisoned. It's not as poisoned as it could be, but it's all poisoned. The faculties of soul are all turned against God by nature. All are poisoned by sin. Wherever there is evidence of God, which is everywhere, man will deny it. You see, God must reach down and save dead men in their trespasses

and sins. You do not heal a dead man. You resurrect him. Man is not sick, not drowning, but dead. Dead is dead. You can't throw him a rope. A dead man can't grab anything. Your mother is dead without Christ. Your culture is dead without Christ. This is the problem with Karl Barth, there's no space-and-time redemption by Christ. There's no change of the unbeliever to believer. There's no challenge to the natural man. That's why Barth is poison. Water and sulfuric acid look the same, right? If you drink sulfuric acid, it will kill you. Barth has placed sulfuric acid in our water bottles and told us it is water. Barth has created the systematically most satanic philosophy ever devised by the mind of man. Salvation is like cleaning a bad tooth. It's no good if your dentist tells you your tooth is okay when it's rotten. The dentist has to go down, drill out the decay and replace it with gold. This is what salvation is.

Then one night in the library I read this passage on the Holy Spirit from *The Defense of the Faith*:

For this reason we must observe at this juncture that the Spirit who applies the work of Christ is himself also a member of the ontological Trinity. He would have to be. Unless he were, the work of salvation would not be the work of God alone. If God was to be maintained in his incommunicable attributes the Spirit of God, not man, had to effect the salvation of man. The only alternative to this would be that man could at some point take the initiative in the matter of his own salvation. This would imply that the salvation wrought by Christ could be frustrated by man. Suppose that none should accept the salvation offered to them. In that case the whole of Christ's work would be in vain and the eternal God would be set at nought by temporal man. Even if we say that in the case of any one individual sinner the question of



Van Til and the author, 1976

salvation is in the last analysis dependent upon man rather than upon God, that is, 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. If we refuse to mix the eternal and the temporal at the point of creation and at the point of the incarnation we must also refuse to mix them at the point of salvation.

It began to come clearer to me. God alone was the author and finisher of my salvation. I was by nature totally depraved. I had no natural inclination to believe in or follow God. Only the work of God's Spirit could save me. God did this by regenerating me through his efficacious call. Faith was a gift of God. I did not believe unto regeneration. The reverse was true: God gave me his Spirit and this created faith. I was given repentance and faith. This is the order of salvation as taught by the Westminster Confession of Faith and by B. B. Warfield's *Plan of Salvation*, which Van Til freely references in the introduction of *The Defense of the Faith*.

Limited Atonement

I digress for a moment to consider the limited or definite Atonement, because it fills in the picture of what it means to become Reformed. God planned the Atonement in eternity. In time, Christ accomplished it perfectly and effectually. All those whom the Father and the Son intended to save will be saved. Christ is the Son of God, or, as Calvin maintained, he is *autotheos*, God himself. He is also perfectly righteous man. What Adam did not do, Christ did in fulfilling man's destiny. The gospel, thus, is a proclamation of the historical, objective, forensic fulfillment of redemption. Christ in history is our perfect substitution, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemp-

tion. He is the way, the truth, and the life. His work guarantees the forgiveness of sins. Van Til said in class, "Not ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths percent pure, like Ivory Soap, but one hundred percent pure and effectual." He maintained the necessity for church history, the Reformed interpretation of Scripture, and the historic creeds. From Nicaea we learn that Christ is God, and from Chalcedon that Jesus Christ is both God and man in one person. And from the Belgic Confession he quoted with regard to the Scriptures: "The Holy Spirit witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves."

How one is to preach the gospel is one of the chief concerns of a seminary education. The gospel should be taught in a manner that is consistent with the Scriptures, church history, and the historic church creeds. The definite Atonement is a linchpin of pure Calvinism and the message of sovereign, electing grace. From the limited Atonement, the mind is directed to the throne of God, where the plan of salvation is initiated, where election is conditioned only by the particular grace of God, and there it sees the perfect forgiveness of sins wrought in Christ.

It also sees the total depravity of man. There is no instinct in man to receive the grace of God, and this precious truth must be preserved, too, if the gospel is to be good news. We should beware in our present church situation of Pelagianism, Arminianism, and semi-Pelagianism or Amyrauldianism. Free will does not save. Morality does not save. Great emotional upheavals and stirrings in the heart for grace do not save. Preachers ought not to preach as though there were “good soil” and “bad soil” in the congregation, as though some stirring in the heart, in the deep heart or in the enthusiastic heart, is part of redemption. Nor does reason save. Only sovereign, electing grace saves. Only God saves, by the working of the three persons of the Trinity. When grace comes, it is irresistible, because it could be none other. No one is righteous, not even one. Those who are thus saved, persevere by the Spirit in their most holy faith.

Christian Witnessing

When I graduated with a Th.M. in New Testament studies, I attended the commencement service and then had lunch at a seafood restaurant. With me at lunch were Van Til and Bruce Hunt. There was a lesson to be had from those two men. One was the foremost theoretician of Reformed apologetics, the other was one of the most notable missionaries. One had spent his life in studies and teaching, and the other in street preaching and witnessing. I had spent time with Hunt, witnessing door-to-door in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Hunt could deliver the gospel in thirty seconds. He would say, “Hi, we’re Christians just spending the day obeying the Bible. The Bible says that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died for our sins and was raised from the dead, according to the Scriptures. You can’t tell if someone has faith by looking at

them. Do you have faith in Jesus Christ?” Then Hunt would let the listener respond. He might make a few comments and leave a tract, if the listener was receptive to it. In all his years, he said, he had never seen a conversion take place in front of him, but he had seen many a convert afterwards. His understanding was that the Holy Spirit must work together with the word to produce faith, but that what he had done was enough. He would keep a logbook, and could tell you approximately how many people he had witnessed to in one year.

Calvinists are often asked, Why witness? How do we witness? How does limited or definite atonement

would place hope in free choice and personal commitment, not in the Spirit of Christ uniting us to himself. God saves to the uttermost those who repent and believe in him, and this is the way the gospel should be offered. We offer it to all, though only the elect will come. We guarantee to the believer the full forgiveness of sins. We believe the elect will respond by God’s grace as we preach the good news to all. We preach a mystery, certainly. While the sinner cannot respond, he is yet culpable and responsible.

Often a preacher will place salvation out there, in the congregation. It is, he says, in your thoughts, your stirrings, your morality, or your committals and emotions. This is not the Reformed gospel, but a type of Arminianism and a counsel of anxiety and despair. The soul cannot rest on its own actions, but it can rest on the perfect work of Christ, who is the perfect Savior.

Once I was walking with Van Til around Machen Hall, and I asked him what Christians should know. He said without hesitation, “They should know the five points of Calvinism.”

Another time I was sharing with him my knowledge of C. S. Lewis. It was a snowy day, and the small patches of grass were covered. He said,

“C. S. Lewis goes to pubs to talk with his friends and drink beer. He smokes a pipe. It’s all so suburban. I’m getting my vitriol out now, that’s good.” Then I noted that Lewis had a writing coterie called “the Inklings.” The next thing I knew, Van Til was bent over in a heap. I asked him if he was well. When he rose up, he was roaring with laughter and had a sunny smile on his face. He said, “Oh, that’s funny. That’s just what C. S. Lewis’s theology is—it’s an inkling.”

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Van Til and the author, 1981

affect our message? As to *why* we witness, we do so because we truly know the good news, and we are commanded to witness by Jesus, who said, “I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge him before the angels of God. But he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God” (Luke 12:8-9 NIV).

As to *how* we witness, the good news can only be good news with a limited Atonement. A message that depends on the will of man to accept Christ’s work would deny the election of God and would deny the full grace of God in regenerating the sinner. It