

THE SCOPE AND LIMITS OF VAN TIL'S TRANSCENDENTAL ARGUMENT:
A RESPONSE TO JOHN FRAME

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The questions that I address in this essay have been asked by a number of people, but the main source is John Frame, who was a student under Cornelius Van Til before succeeding him as professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary. Frame is sympathetic to Van Til's approach to apologetics, but he has published a number of criticisms of Van Til which have been found persuasive by many other Christians interested in apologetics – Christians both anti-Van Til and sympathetic to Van Til's approach to apologetics. Frame says that he rejects Van Til's claim of a single transcendental argument to prove the Biblical God. Instead, he calls for a "presuppositionalism of the heart" that involves using a number of different arguments, including the traditional ones that Van Til rejects, all with the transcendental *goal* of honoring the sovereignty of God. In this essay I address one of his main arguments for his position: Proving every element of Christian theism with one argument is unrealistic, so multiple arguments should be allowed.¹

¹ See John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God: An Introduction* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1994), 72-73, 85-88; and John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1995), 315-17. His other main arguments for a "presuppositionalism of the heart" are 1) Van Til's demand for an argument that proves God's existence with absolute certainty is untenable, so probabilistic arguments should be allowed; 2) Van Til's demand that arguments proving God's existence be in a negative form is unnecessary, so positive

The Whole of Christian Theism by a Single Argument:

Frame claims that it is Van Til's position that we must prove the whole of Christian Theism with a single argument:

Van Til's slogan, "Christian theism as a unit," should be understood with such qualifications. . . . I do not think that the whole of Christian theism can be established by a single argument, unless that argument is highly complex! I do not think an argument should be criticized because it fails to prove every element of Christian theism.²

The conclusion of Van Til's argument is that intelligible predication presupposes the biblical God. "The Biblical God" includes the "what" as well as the "that" – the whole biblical teaching concerning God.³

In Chapter 14, we considered Van Til's view that every apologetic argument ought to prove the whole of Christian theism, the "what" as well as the "that." . . . I believe, however, that proving the whole of Christian theism is a pretty tall order for a single apologetic argument.⁴

Few if any would disagree with Frame that "that proving the whole of Christian theism is a pretty tall order for a single apologetic argument," especially when it seems to refer to every detail of the Bible: "every element of Christian theism,"⁵ "the full richness of

arguments should be allowed; and 3) Van Til's claim of antithesis between believers and unbelievers in terms of verbal formulations is too extreme, so antithesis should be seen more as an attitude of the heart rather than in terms of arguments.

² Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 72.

³ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 315-16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 264.

⁵ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 72.

biblical revelation.”⁶ This seems to mean proving that every statement in the Bible is necessarily true as the precondition of rationality, even something like Abraham being from Ur rather than from some other city (cf. Gen 15:17). In a 1976 essay Frame was hesitant to attribute a view like that to Van Til: “Even for Van Til, I assume, not all doctrines are ‘major.’ ‘Abraham lived in Ur of the Chaldees’ is not as ‘central’ as the doctrine of the Trinity.”⁷ But Frame’s claim that Van Til requires one argument to prove “every element of Christian theism” and “the full richness of biblical revelation,” seem to mean that he thinks that Van Til taught that even less-than-central teachings of Scripture should be proven by a single argument.⁸

Another interpretation of “the whole” or “every element” of “Christian theism” might be “every doctrine necessary for Christian orthodoxy.” In conversations that I have had with others about this subject, they often assume this meaning, since how else could Van Til call it *Christian* theism? A single argument that proved that every doctrine of Christian orthodoxy is necessarily true as the precondition of rationality would be less daunting than proving every statement in Scripture, but it still seems like a mountain too high to climb. How are you going to show that it’s necessary for the possibility of

⁶ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 265. In a more recent essay, Frame presents a view of Van Til closer to what I defend here: “Does this principle imply that we must prove all the doctrines of Christianity in every apologetic argument we employ? Critics are sometimes tempted to understand Van Til this way, and Van Til’s own expressions sometimes encourage that misunderstanding. But Van Til was too thoughtful to teach anything so absurd.” John Frame, “Divine Aseity and Apologetics,” *Revelation and Reason: New Essays in Reformed Apologetics* (eds. K. Scott Oliphant and Lane G. Tipton; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2007), 119. But to prove that the view is wrong, Frame cites the very pages of his book *Cornelius Van Til* that I examine here that promote the misunderstanding.

⁷ John Frame, “The Problem of Theological Paradox,” in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (ed. Gary North; Vallejo, Ca.: Ross House Books, 1976), 305. This essay was republished as *Van Til: The Theologian* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Pilgrim Publishing Company, 1976).

⁸ B.B. Warfield commented that claiming that the task of apologetics is “to take up each tenet of Christianity in turn and seek to establish its truth by a direct appeal to reason” is “the old vulgar rationalism.” “Apologetics,” *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (ed. S. M. Jackson; New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1908), I, 234; and reprinted in *Studies in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 8. Van Til, I’ll argue, would agree with Warfield on this point.

rationality that Christ rose from the dead?⁹ I will attempt to show that Van Til made neither of these claims when he talked about proving Christian theism as a unit and that what he did claim is much more modest and reasonable.

Since Frame says in *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*, “In Chapter 14, we considered Van Til’s view that every apologetic argument ought to prove the whole of Christian theism,”¹⁰ let’s look at Frame’s argument in Chapter 14. He says in this chapter that he agrees with Van Til that “all facts are theory laden,”¹¹ and therefore an apologist cannot prove *that* God exists without proving *what* kind of God exists. Frame thinks that Van Til’s point should be obvious, so obvious that it’s trivial:

But if all the facts are laden with meaning, then it is simply impossible to separate fact from meaning, no matter how much we may try. We cannot even talk about the “fact of the Resurrection” without having some meaning in mind. A resurrection, after all, is a resurrection, not a storm at sea.¹²

If Frame is agreeing with Van Til, why bring it up as a disagreement? We have to wait to a later chapter to see what Frame’s point of contention is here. Frame even notes a few sentences later that Van Til *rejects* the view that God must be exhaustively known to be known at all.¹³ This should count against Frame’s characterization of Van Til’s position

⁹ Not only can some doctrines essential to orthodoxy not be deduced from the attributes of God that are transcendently necessary, but some doctrines that can be deduced are not necessary for orthodoxy, as it would seem from 1 Corinthians 10:25-33. Paul argues from the fact of God’s sovereign creation of all things to the conclusion that food sacrificed to idols can be eaten in good conscience, yet he also commands us to be accommodating to someone who believes that food sacrificed to idols is unclean (cf. Rom 14).

¹⁰ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 264.

¹¹ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 183.

¹² Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 183.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 183. Van Til specifically criticizes Aquinas for holding a position that demands that we have exhaustive knowledge of God in order to prove His existence: “On this argument he could not at all prove the existence of God unless he fully knew the nature of God. He himself faces the question how it is possible that we should be able to say *anything* about God, if we cannot say *everything* about him.”¹³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980 [1971]), 95.

of requiring everything to be proven about God with one argument, but apparently Frame just sees it as an inconsistency in Van Til's thinking. Frame then concludes that "Van Til does not present enough argument to require a particular degree of definition in an apologetic proof,"¹⁴ even though *Frame never shows in this chapter where Van Til talks about a particular degree of definition nor where Van Til demanded that the whole of Christian theism be proven by a single argument*, despite his claim quoted above that in Chapter 14 he examines Van Til's defense of these views. Frame is under the mistaken impression that Van Til is claiming that we must prove everything about God on the basis of Van Til's observation that fact and meaning cannot be separated. Frame is right that that would be a *non sequitur*, but he provides no proof that Van Til is making that argument.

In a later chapter on Thomas Aquinas, we find out why Frame made the curious agreement with/criticism of Van Til that all facts are laden with meaning. Frame argues in this chapter that, since it's impossible to separate fact and meaning, Van Til should not have criticized Aquinas for separating the idea "that" God exists from the idea of "what" kind of God exists. And then, since Frame doesn't like Van Til criticizing Aquinas for making an absolute distinction between "that" and "what," Frame morphs Van Til's criticism of Aquinas into a criticism about degrees of distinction away from a bare existence, i.e. that Aquinas did not prove enough about God's character: "[N]o argument proves bare existence without any additional definition. If Van Til objects to Aquinas on these grounds, he should show how much 'whatness' is required in an argument for God's existence, and precisely why that degree of definition is required."¹⁵ Then after fabricating a new argument for Van Til against Aquinas because he doesn't like Van Til's actual criticism, Frame then finds that the argument that he fabricated on Van Til's behalf is a bad argument as well. It's obviously too burdensome to prove "the whole of Christian theism"¹⁶ with one argument. With friends like this, Van Til doesn't need enemies; and yet Frame is regarded as the leading living authority on Van Til, which has put Van Tillian apologetics on hard times in these days.

¹⁴ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 183.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 315-17.

The root of the problem is that Frame does not understand Van Til's actual criticism. Van Til is criticizing Aquinas for *claiming* to separate the "that" from the "what" even though it's impossible to rationally do so; that distinction doesn't enter into Frame's consideration. The degree of definition is not the issue for Van Til at all, but rather defining God as a completely empty concept.

Even though Frame says that separating facts from meaning is so absurd that Van Til should not have criticized Aquinas for it, Aquinas does exactly that in respect to God's nature: "God is a supremely simple form, as was shown above (Question [3], Article [7]). . . . Reason cannot reach up to simple form, so as to know 'what it is;' but it can know 'whether it is.'"¹⁷ God is a "that" (something that exists) without a "what" (having particular attributes). In other words, reason proves a god that is an empty concept. On the basis of Aristotelian philosophy Aquinas mistakenly *thought* that he had an argument that proved bare existence when he said that God is a simple form. Frame thinks that Aquinas might be combining merely "a truncated Aristotelianism (no longer the Aristotelian system) with Christian thought"¹⁸ – not adopting the bad, anti-theistic parts of the system, like the form/matter scheme of reality. But this quote shows that Aquinas endorses the very ideas of Aristotle that are most destructive to the Christian theistic worldview.

Aquinas is hardly the only philosopher to have claimed that there can be a "that" without a "what." There is, for example, Anaximander's indefinite *apeiron*, Immanuel Kant's noumenal realm, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's statement that "Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent" in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Van Til criticizes Philo for claiming that reason proves that God exists without proving what kind of God exists.¹⁹ Van Til compares Thomas' view of God with Anaximander's view of the *apeiron*: "It is only if first with the early Greeks we assume that all reality has one character, that we can also with Anaximander assert that God is indeterminate. So also the method of Thomas should lead him to say that God is both wholly determinable and

¹⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, Question 12, Article 12.

¹⁸ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, p. 341.

¹⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *Christ and the Jews* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), chapter 1.

wholly indeterminable by man.”²⁰ Van Til compares Anaximander’s view to modern philosophy in general: “Anaximander expressed this idea when he said that God is indefinite or indeterminate. Non-Christian philosophy has not, in any basic sense, made progress beyond this point.”²¹ Van Til also says that neo-orthodox theologians like Karl Barth have not made progress beyond Anaximander’s *apeiron* either: “There is no more meaning in the idea of God as Barth holds it than there was in the idea of the *apeiron*, the indefinite, of Anaximander the Greek philosopher.”²² Modern theology in general, Van Til says, embraces the same error: “The God we are talking about, the modern theologian can assure him, is not the God of Luther or of Calvin. Our God is as indeterminate as your own Beyond. He is as indeterminate as was the *apeiron* of Anaximander.”²³ The point of all this is to say that Van Til’s argument against Thomas Aquinas concerning a “that” without a “what” is no minor rabbit trail, no peculiar criticism just to pick on a Roman Catholic. Van Til’s rejection of an indeterminate unity addresses an idea promoted by philosophers throughout history. His criticism expresses the “one” half of the major theme of his writings, the “one and the many” problem, which is Van Til’s basic argument for Christian Theism – that viewing the one and the many in abstraction from each other undermines the possibility of rationality.

The theological pedigree of Van Til’s criticism of Aquinas’ abstract view of God can be traced through B.B. Warfield and other Reformed theologians back to John Calvin – even though they did not see the reach of the philosophical implications that Van Til does, with his post-Kantian, post-Hegelian insights on the epistemological problem of the One and the Many. Calvin defended the aseity (self-existence) or autotheotes (self-deity) of the Son in opposition to the view that the Son’s divinity is eternally generated from the

²⁰ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), 174.

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1996), republished as Cornelius Van Til and E.H. Sigward, *The Pamphlets, Tracts, and Offprints of Cornelius Van Til*, electronic ed. (New York: Labels Army Company, 1997), no pages.

²² Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976), 84.

²³ Cornelius Van Til, *The Great Debate Today* (The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company: Nutley, NJ, 1970), 127.

Father, as held by Aquinas and many others before Calvin, which leads to a view of God's simplicity in terms of an abstract unity rather than an equal ultimacy of the persons of the Trinity.²⁴ Van Til quotes extensively from B.B. Warfield's explanation and defense of Calvin's views of this controversy in Warfield's book *Calvin and Calvinism*.²⁵ Van Til quotes this statement of Calvin's directly on the issue: "While he proclaims his unity, he distinctly sets it before us as existing in three persons. These we must hold, unless the bare and empty name of Deity merely is to flutter in our brain without any genuine knowledge."²⁶ The "bare and empty name of Deity" that excludes humans having "genuine knowledge" of God becomes, in Van Til's writings, a broad philosophical argument that denial of the equal ultimacy of the persons of the ontological Trinity undermines the possibility of any knowledge, whether of God or of the world.

The source of Frame's confused analysis of Van Til's critique of Aquinas is that the "that" and "what" issue relates to Van Til's argument concerning the one and the many, but Frame only dismissively mentions this issue briefly in the chapter on Aquinas: "Thus, as Van Til says, he does attempt to impose the Christian worldview on top of Aristotle's scheme of abstract form and chaotic matter and the Neoplatonic scheme of wholly other deity and chain of being."²⁷ Frame announces his agreement with Van Til here, but he doesn't relate it to Van Til's criticism of Aquinas for separating the "that" from the "what." If he did, he should have realized that Van Til is accurate in his criticism of Aquinas and that specifying a particular degree of definition is irrelevant to it. Rather than following up his agreement with Van Til by explaining in detail how Aquinas' compromise with Greek philosophy undermines Christian doctrine and apologetics, Frame scolds Van Til that such an analysis is rude: "Yet we must be careful not to attribute to Aquinas all the absurdities that might be logically derivable from his

²⁴ See Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism and the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Nathan D. Shannon, "Aseity of the Persons and the Oneness of God: A Review of Brannon Ellis on Calvin's Trinitarian Theology," *Philosophia Christi* 16, no. 1 (2014).

²⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1974), 223, 227-228.

²⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 1, ch. 13, sec. 2; quoted in Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 223.

²⁷ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 267.

system. That sort of analysis is neither fair, nor illuminating, nor useful to the progress of Christian apologetics.”²⁸ Despite this harsh assessment, a page before this Frame observes that Van Til “tended to look at every item as part of a system,” and Frame acknowledges that “That kind of criticism has value.” But then he says that “all of us, including Van Til, have made mistakes,” so “none of us could claim to have formulated a sound argument about anything” if we only took the systematic approach to evaluating other people’s arguments.²⁹ He says that to be fair to Aquinas and other authors we must examine their arguments “one by one, in a piecemeal fashion.”³⁰ There is some truth to that, but arguments can be related to each other in various degrees, depending on the author’s way of thinking and the variety of subjects being discussed. Someone might write a newspaper article about horseback riding and then write for a professional journal about chemistry. A mistake in one of those essays does not mean that the author must have made a mistake in the other. But that observation, while uncontested, is a strained way to defend Aquinas against Van Til’s criticisms. Aristotle’s view of form and matter is a comprehensive vision of how reality is put together, unlike horseback riding. Aquinas realizes this, so his adoption of the Greek view of the one and the many is no minor intrusion into his philosophy but a view of the world that he tries to thoroughly integrate into it. Most importantly with respect to Van Til’s criticism of Aquinas on the issue of the “that” and the “what,” Aquinas makes an *explicit appeal* to the form/matter aspect of Aristotle’s philosophy in order describe God and how we know Him. Frame’s advocacy for a piecemeal rather than systematic critique of Aquinas misdirects Frame’s readers from this fact. By dismissing Van Til’s systematic critique of Aquinas as rude, Frame fails to accurately and adequately discuss Van Til’s main criticism of Aquinas and instead evaluates Van Til’s critique of Aquinas in terms of an argument that Van Til never made.

The heart of Van Til’s criticism of Aquinas is that Aquinas imports the Greek concept of the Great Chain of Being, or the Form/Matter scheme, into Christian theology:

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 266.

³⁰ Ibid.

The natural-supernatural theology of Roman Catholicism is the result of an attempt to fit the Christian framework of God-in-Christ and his relation to the world into the form-matter scheme of Aristotle. The transcendent God of the natural theology of Thomas Aquinas is attained by the method of remotion and is therefore relegated to the realm of the indeterminate.³¹

In terms of that Greek view, being (“form”) and plurality (“matter”) are at two opposite ends of the chain or scale. Plurality arises from non-being on one end of the scale, and pure being is achieved by removing all plurality, thus leaving it, as Frame says, a “bare existence.”³² When all content is negated from the nature of God, a process that Aquinas calls “remotion,” God becomes an empty concept, a “that” without a “what.” We have seen in *Summa Theologica* where Aquinas says that “God is a supremely simple form” so that reason cannot “know ‘what it is;’ but it can know ‘whether it is.’” Similarly, in *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas’ says, “Now, in considering the divine substance, we should especially make use of the method of remotion. For, by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is.”³³ By remotion “we approach nearer to a knowledge of God according as through our intellect we are able to remove more and more things

³¹ Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1979), 57. Also see Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 73-105, 217-219; and Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 169-175. Arvin Vos defends Aquinas from the charges brought against him by Protestants, and Van Til in particular, in his book *Aquinas, Calvin & Contemporary Protestant Thought: A Critique of Protestant Views on the Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Christian University Press, 1985). However, Vos does not address Van Til’s criticisms of Aquinas as I describe them here. Vos says over and over that Aquinas’ view is that nature and grace are complimentary, and he sees the only alternative as destroying nature in favor of grace (p. 144); but he never addresses Van Til’s argument that the Aristotelian idea of a scale of being is inconsistent with the Biblical view of nature and grace.

³² Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 265.

³³ Thomas Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith (Summa Contra Gentiles)* tr. by Anton C. Pegis, Vol. 2 (Garden City: Hanover House, 1955), 96 (1:14.2). Van Til quotes this passage in *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 169 and in his article “Nature and Scripture” in *The Infallible Word*, Ed. By N.B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 2002), 288.

from Him.”³⁴ The Christian view does not allow God to be equated with that kind of pure form because God is triune – the one and the many are equally ultimate in God, rather than originally in abstraction from one another. Since Aquinas wants to merge two incommensurable worldviews, Aristotle’s philosophy and Christianity, Van Til says that Aquinas becomes Janus-faced, with “Thomas, the theologian,” wanting to assert that God is the triune Creator, while “Thomas, the philosopher,” is wanting to view God and man in terms of the Greek scale of being.³⁵

Because of the fundamental inconsistencies between the two worldviews of Aristotelianism and Christianity, Van Til says that Aquinas ends up undermining Christian doctrine in several fundamental areas:

- 1) The Greek view is incompatible with the Creator/creature distinction. To the extent anything exists, it is part of abstract unity (i.e. part of “God”), and to the extent anything does not participate in abstract unity, it dissolves into non-existence. This view is inconsistent with a God with content to His nature who communicates with content to a real creation that is distinct from Him.³⁶
- 2) It is incompatible with a beginning to creation. There could not have been an act of creation out of nothing by God that began the universe on this view.³⁷ Pure being is an impersonal, changeless blank; it does not have the nature to plan and then choose to create the changing material world. “Thus the argument for a first mover in the Thomistic form is to the effect that God’s existence as the first mover is proved only if there be no motion, no time, no history at all.”³⁸ Also, matter arises from non-being, independently of Being (pure unity). Since there is always non-being, matter exists eternally in the

³⁴ *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 1:14:2.

³⁵ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 96. See chapter 2, “The Reformed Pastor and Traditional Roman Catholicism” in *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* for Van Til’s detailed discussion of this issue.

³⁶ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969), 57; and *Who Do You Say That I Am?* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1975), 45-47.

³⁷ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 96.

³⁸ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 95.

Greek view. Matter is not the creation of Being (“God”). Matter and Being are two independent, impersonal sources of reality that eternally intermingle to produce the intelligible world. Aquinas the Christian theologian says that God created matter, but Van Til’s point is that Aquinas the philosopher adopts a view of God from Aristotle that does not allow that.

- 3) It is incompatible with mankind’s fall from a state of perfection. On this view, sin is metaphysical, a lack of being, a “slenderness of being,” rather than sin being ethical, a choice of the will.³⁹ Since man is finite, he would have to be sinful from the first moment of his existence, or “practically without ethical content,”⁴⁰ if not for a grace given to Adam before the Fall that Thomists call the *donum superadditum*: “He needs grace because he is a creature even though he is not a sinner. Hence God really owes grace to man at least to some extent.”⁴¹ Grace on the scale of being view is participation in divinity.⁴²
- 4) Just as a scale of being is incompatible with a fall from grace at a point in history, it also is incompatible with salvation at a point in history since salvation is essentially “an elevation in the chain of being.”⁴³
- 5) It is incompatible with the incarnation.⁴⁴ This follows from the lack of Creator/creature distinction. Christ would not have two natures, one fully divine and one fully human as confessed in the Chalcedon Creed. As early church father Origen of Alexandria incorrectly formulated Christ’s nature on the basis of his attempt to synthesize Platonism with Christianity, the Son is a little lower on the scale of being from God the Father, who is pure being.
- 6) It is incompatible with a finished revelation from God. God can’t speak on the human level to communicate absolute truth to man in Aristotle’s

³⁹ Van Til, *Who Do You Say That I Am?*, 45.

⁴⁰ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 205.

⁴¹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (rev. and abr. ed.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1967), 57.

⁴² Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 205.

⁴³ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 92-93.

⁴⁴ Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 59; and *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 226.

worldview. Humans live in the realm of Becoming rather than Being, so all truth in the process of changing (a forerunner of twentieth century Process Theology). To use Plato's analogy, in this life we are all still in the cave looking at distorted shadows of the Good rather than looking at the Good undistorted.⁴⁵ To the extent that man truly knows God, "he must also *be* God."⁴⁶

- 7) It is incompatible with absolute ethical obligations. Form and matter are eternal, equal, independent sources of reality. Form can't really be said to be better than matter. Evil is as ultimate as the Good.⁴⁷ One is just as justified to live a materialistic life and ignore the intellectual life – be a satisfied pig rather than a Socrates – as the other way around. Aquinas enjoyed the intellectual life, but most men in our day would much rather eat pizza, drink beer, and watch football than suffer the torment of reading Aquinas. Also, since the revelation from God is never clear (point 6), "the word 'guilt' can scarcely be connected with the sin of man."⁴⁸

As "Thomas the theologian," Aquinas rejects some of these implications from the Greek view of form and matter. He holds that God created matter,⁴⁹ although that required Aquinas to attribute to God an intentional, volitional mind that is excluded by the idea of God being an empty abstraction. He holds that there was a beginning to creation, although he also argued that "reason" (based on Aristotle's worldview of form versus matter) could not disprove an eternal material world.⁵⁰ However, the problem is

⁴⁵ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 92.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 87, emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ See Van Til's comments about Ideas of mud, hair and filth in Plato's ideal realm: *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 37, 219; *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 82-83; *Christian Theistic Evidences* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1978), 55, 141; *Psychology of Religion* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1972), 74.

⁴⁸ Van Til *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 92.

⁴⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Q. 44, Art. 2; and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, II, c. 16.

⁵⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *On The Eternity of the World [De Aeternitate Mundi]*.

that the scale of being view, with “God” being an impersonal, abstract blank, *excludes* the possibility of a creation out of nothing:

If Thomas, the theologian, hears by revelation that God has created the universe out of nothing and he tells this to Thomas, the philosopher, the latter will answer that he cannot know such to be the case, indeed, that he will never be able to know such a thing to be so. He must add that the nature of reality does not allow for any such thing to be so. For surely faith will never teach anything that is out of accord with right reason, and has not God given reason to man? Thomas maintains that faith takes over where reason cannot go. But what will he do when both “reason” and “faith” make contradictory statements about the nature of reality? In other words, the argument with respect to the first mover is an argument about the nature of the whole of reality that is utterly out of accord with the nature of this reality as it is said to be in the Christian religion.⁵¹

While Aquinas holds to the innocence of Adam before the Fall, he tried to integrate the Greek form/matter scheme into the meaning of good and evil, holding that goodness is a lack of being.⁵² Aquinas tries to reconcile the Greek view of the chain of being with Christian theology when they are in fact irreconcilable. Aquinas has essentially enshrined a speechless, inanimate, finite idol and called it the God of the Bible:

That the gods produced by the “theistic proofs” are frequently nothing but idols is plain to any one familiar with the history of philosophy. Aristotle proved the existence of a god; there must, he reasoned, be an unmoved Mover back of all movement. Thomas Aquinas used essentially the same method that Aristotle did in proving the existence of God. Yet the god of

⁵¹ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 96-97.

⁵² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Q. 5, Art. 1-3.

Aristotle did not create the world, does not control it, is not even a person.⁵³

Although Aquinas argues for God being the efficient cause of the world in his Five Ways, Aristotle's own view of the Prime Mover was *not* as a creator. Aristotle held that matter is eternal.⁵⁴ He did not even view the motion in the world as being eternally generated by the will of the Prime Mover. The Prime Mover is not the efficient cause of the world, like a push that starts a ball rolling, but the final cause, the end toward which the world strives. The motion in the world is generated because the world loves the Prime Mover, like a dog that is set in motion by the smell of meat.⁵⁵ The Prime Mover has no love for the world, of which it knows nothing. The Prime Mover is thought thinking itself – it only thinks about itself; although as a pure blank it really could not think about anything. Aristotle even speculated that there could be fifty-five unmoved movers,⁵⁶ although he preferred to think of there only being one.⁵⁷ In contrast, the God of the Bible is an absolute God, the source of all unity and diversity. There can only be one such absolute.⁵⁸

Frame notes several areas where Van Til points out that Aristotle's worldview is inconsistent with the Christian view of God, such as that Aristotle's prime mover being a pure form that did not create the world and does not know the world.⁵⁹ However, Frame

⁵³ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 190.

⁵⁴ *Physics* VIII, 1.

⁵⁵ *Metaphysics* XII, 7.

⁵⁶ *Metaphysics* XII, 8.

⁵⁷ XII, 10.

⁵⁸ Frame says that there is no inconsistency between Aquinas's Five Ways in themselves and Van Til's theory of knowledge. John Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 2015), p. 75. I am not focusing on the Five Ways in this essay, but one point to observe is that Aquinas recognizes the need to respond to an infinite regress of movers, but that problem does not arise with an absolute God, who is the source of all unity and diversity of the world. There is no cause that could get in back of an absolute God. The problem of infinite regress only arises with a finite first mover. And Van Til holds that only an absolute God allows for the possibility of knowledge.

⁵⁹ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 258-60.

thinks that Aquinas might be combining merely “a truncated Aristotelianism (no longer the Aristotelian system) with Christian thought.”⁶⁰ But we have just seen that Aquinas doesn’t do that. He endorses those very ideas of Aristotle that are destructive to the Christian theistic worldview, namely, the form/matter view of reality in which God is a pure form.

These topics could be explored further. Shortly before Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) came on the intellectual scene in the Middle Ages, public lectures on Aristotle’s writings were briefly banned at the University of Paris (from 1210 to 1231) because of the incompatibility of Aristotle’s philosophy with Christian theology, and including a discussion of the reasons behind that would provide an interesting background for Van Til’s criticisms of Aquinas in a book on Van Til.⁶¹ But a reader of Frame’s analysis of Van Til’s critique of Aquinas is diverted with a charge of rudeness from understanding Van Til’s arguments on the issue, or any similar criticisms made by Christians in the past, into an argument that Van Til never made.

The Greek scale of being not only undermines Christian orthodoxy, it is also irrational. Nothing rational can be said about a unity with no content – a pure blank – or about a diversity with no unity – pure chaos. And these two irrational concepts cannot serve as the basis for the rational world by combining together.⁶² Aristotle’s Prime

⁶⁰ Ibid., 341.

⁶¹ James Hannam summarizes the thirteenth century objections to Aristotle, which mirror Van Til’s: “Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Aristotle’s natural philosophy contradicted Christianity on some central points. Christians believe that we all have souls that survive death; that God created the world at a definite point in the past; and, most fundamentally, that God is all-powerful and not subject to the laws of nature himself. Aristotle disagreed with all of this. He insisted the world was eternal, that it had existed forever and always would exist. There was no moment of creation and no creator. He was also highly ambivalent about personal immortality. Although he believed that humans have a soul, he also held that it dissolves at death. There is no last judgement, heaven or hell. This was bad enough, but Aristotle hardly believed in God either. The idea of a personal God, who answered prayers and intervened in the lives of men, was complete nonsense as far as the Greek philosopher was concerned. He did believe in a ‘prime mover’ who kept the universe turning, but this impersonal being had no interest in mankind and was nothing like the God of the Bible.” James Hannam, *God's Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science* (Icon Book, Kindle Edition, 2009), 79-80.

⁶² See Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 320; *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 38.

Mover that Aquinas posits as the first cause of the world is an irrational principle of blank unity that cannot serve as the cause of the diverse world of which we have intelligible experience. In the following passage referencing Paul's statement in Romans 1:18f. that God is revealed to all men through creation, Van Til makes clear that his objection to Aquinas is that he offers an empty concept as God, and as well as making clear that his objection to Aquinas is *not* that Aquinas doesn't prove the fullness of the nature of God:

This distinction between the essence and the being of God fits in with Rome's natural theology. It does not fit in, we believe, with a Reformed conception of natural theology. To make a distinction between the bare that and the what is unintelligible in any field. We cannot intelligently speak of something and afterward determine what we have been speaking of. We may grow in clarity with respect to that of which we have been speaking, but we cannot speak of something that has no delineation whatsoever in our minds. Then, too, Paul tells us, in effect, that the voice of the true God, the only existent God, is everywhere present. He does not, to be sure, say that this God is present in the fulness of His revelation. Yet it is the true God, the God, not a God, that is everywhere to be heard, whatever button we may press. It is the what not merely the that, of God's existence that the heathen find impressed upon them.⁶³

Paul says that God's attributes are revealed through nature: "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). If "no argument proves bare existence,"⁶⁴ as Frame says, that's because the Greek view is indefensible and should be rejected by Christians rather than attempting to integrate it into Christian theology as Aquinas did.

In contrast to the Greek view, the Christian view of God that unity and diversity are related to each other in God from all eternity allows for a rational world. The Christian worldview begins with the absolutely rational as ultimate, rather than the irrational as the Greeks taught, and so is able to account for rationality in the world

⁶³ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972), 54.

⁶⁴ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 265.

created by the absolutely rational God. Van Til derives a number of Christian doctrines from the concept of God as the ultimate One and Many, as we will see below, but the number of those derived doctrines is not the issue with his criticisms of Aquinas. The issue is simply to show by the transcendental argument for the existence of God (“TAG”) that plurality must be equally ultimate with unity in God’s being, rather than God being an empty unity – a concept with no content. But since Frame dismisses Van Til’s “unfair” but admittedly accurate criticism that Aquinas’ adoption of Greek categories entails irrational and anti-Christian assumptions and conclusions, and substitutes a critique of Aquinas that Van Til never held, it should be no surprise that Frame’s application of that critique to how many doctrines of Christian theism Van Til’s TAG is supposed to prove is off target.

Consistent with Frame’s misunderstanding on this issue, many students of Van Til have assumed that when Van Til criticizes proving a “bare theism,” he is saying that we should not prove just one, or just a few, of the attributes of God; rather, we have to prove the full nature of God as presented in Scripture in order to be scripturally faithful Christians. This mistaken view of Van Til’s position is then used by some to argue for the traditional proofs for the existence of God on the ground that there is no reason to say that an argument is unsound if it does in fact prove one of God’s attributes, such as that He is the First Cause of the world, even though it doesn’t prove other divine attributes.

But as should be obvious from the discussion above, this understanding of Van Til is mistaken, and so it is a mistaken way to defend the traditional proofs against Van Til’s criticisms of them. Van Til’s criticism of proving a “bare theism” is a criticism of proving a god that is a form with all content excluded, a “that” without a “what.” This kind of god is not merely lacking in some of the attributes of the Christian god; it logically *excludes* the Christian God, who, since He is triune, has particulars and universals as equally ultimate aspects of His being. As Van Til says in *Common Grace and the Gospel*, “How could ‘the theistic proofs’ then be sound, for if they ‘prove’ that the God of Aristotle exists, then they disprove that the God of Christianity exists.”⁶⁵ And as he puts it in *The Defense of the Faith*, a person is “quite mistaken” to think that “the Christian idea of the trinity can be added to the Greek idea of the unity of God. The one

⁶⁵ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 182; cf. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 102, 302.

God of Aristotle retains its oneness only if kept in abstraction from the world.”⁶⁶ The empty form of Aristotle’s god could not create or even set in motion the diverse, cause-and-effect world of sense experience. Aristotle’s blank god does not allow for the possibility of intelligible experience, rationality, or knowledge; and thus proving such a god is not a stepping stone to proving the Christian God. Yes, Aristotle’s god and the Bible’s God share the similarity that they are both the ultimate sources of unity for the world, but the unity that Aristotle’s god provides undermines the possibility of rationality, while the unity of the Bible’s God is of the type that provides the preconditions for rationality. That which undermines the possibility of any rationality cannot be a stepping stone to further rational arguments. A full explanation of Van Til’s criticisms of the traditional arguments for the existence of God has to wait for another essay, but suffice to say here that his criticism is not about needing to prove all the attributes of God with one argument. Van Til’s criticism of Aquinas is that he thinks that he has proven the Christian God when he proves Aristotle’s god, but the nature of that god excludes the Christian god and undermines the possibility of human rationality.

Conversely, as I explain further below,⁶⁷ many will be surprised to learn that, despite Van Til’s frequent characterization of his argument as being that the existence of the “ontological trinity” is necessary for human rationality, there is no instance in which Van Til argues that three is the necessary number of Persons in the Godhead to account for the intelligibility of facts. Intelligibility requires that the one and the many be equally ultimate in God, but how many “many” does not add anything to the argument. Thus Van Til’s argument cannot prove everything about God, even that He exists in three persons.

Christian Theism as a Unit (CTU)

In *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, Frame refers to Van Til’s phrase “Christian Theism as a unit” as evidence that Van Til meant that “the whole of Christian theism can

⁶⁶ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1955), 238.

⁶⁷ See below, page 35.

be establish by a single argument, . . . [proving] every element of Christian theism.”⁶⁸ At first glance, Van Til’s use of the phrase might seem to justify Frame’s view:

For better or for worse the Protestant apologist is committed to the doctrine of Scripture as the infallibly inspired final revelation of God to man. This being the case, he is committed to the defense of Christian theism as a unit. For him theism is not really theism unless it is Christian theism. The Protestant apologist cannot be concerned to prove the existence of any other God than the one who has spoken to man authoritatively and finally through Scripture.⁶⁹

Frame assumes what Van Til means by “Christian theism as a unit” without providing a close-reading analysis of how the phrase is used in Van Til’s writings.⁷⁰ To understand what Van Til means here, we should see what kind of arguments Van Til uses to support the claim. This will indicate what the nature of the claim was to begin with. Of course, it’s possible that Van Til made claims that were overreaching – that he failed to adequately support. But we owe him the courtesy of trying to understand his various statements as consistent with each other.⁷¹

Following the quote above, Van Til argues for the necessity of special revelation, noting that “Even before the entrance of sin, as already noted, man required supernatural positive revelation as a supplement to revelation in the created universe around and within him.”⁷² And since God saw that it was necessary to give Adam information through special revelation in the state of innocence, *a fortiori*, special revelation is needed after the fall when man suppresses the knowledge of God through creation and needs redemption, which is not a part of natural revelation: “If then even man in paradise could read nature aright only in connection with and in light of supernatural positive

⁶⁸ Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, 72.

⁶⁹ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 122.

⁷⁰ Maybe that’s because Frame was writing on a popular level, but careful scholarship requires more.

⁷¹ This is a principle that Aristotle endorsed in *Poetics*, sect. 1461a-b, but not because his form/matter scheme is true, but because he borrows capital (created faculties, common grace, natural revelation) from the concrete universal God that made and sustains him!

⁷² Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 123.

revelation, how much the more is this true of man after the fall. . . . Of God's intention to save a people for his own precious possession he could learn nothing from nature."⁷³

Furthermore, Van Til points out the fact that since Scripture is the voice of the absolute God, Scripture is absolutely authoritative in every matter of which it speaks: "The proper attitude of reason to the authority of Scripture, then, is but typical of the proper attitude of reason to the whole of the revelation of God. The objects man must seek to know are always of such nature as God asserts they are. God's revelation is always authoritarian."⁷⁴ He concludes that this leads to a particular apologetic methodology:

When these matters are kept in mind, it will be seen clearly that the true method for any Protestant with respect to the Scripture (Christianity) and with respect to the existence of God (theism) must be the indirect method of reasoning by presupposition. In fact it then appears that the argument for the Scriptures as the infallible revelation of God is, to all intents and purposes, the same as the argument for the existence God. . . . No proof for this God and for the truth of his revelation in Scripture can be offered by an appeal to anything in human experience that has not itself received its light from the God whose existence and whose revelation it is supposed to prove.⁷⁵

In short, Van Til's argument for "Christian theism as a unit" is that first, Scripture (special revelation) is necessary both before and after the Fall to properly understand the will of God; we should not think that natural revelation about God is a sufficient guide to properly understand God's will, especially after man's reasoning has been corrupted by sin. And second, this Scripture is absolutely authoritative because it derives its authority from its absolute Author; therefore the argument for the existence of an absolutely authoritative God is basically the same for the argument for an absolutely authoritative

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 125.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 125-26.

Scripture, rather than a completely different method used to prove the authority of Scripture than is used to prove an absolute God.

Notice what Van Til has not done. He does not attempt to prove every detail of Christian theism that is taught in the Bible with a single argument. Nor does Van Til's argument here involve any historical details like proving that Abraham was from Ur rather than from some other city because it's necessarily true as the precondition for rationality. The only aspect of that detail that involves transcendental necessity is that, because the detail of Abraham's hometown is spoken by God, it must be an absolutely accurate historical fact. You don't even see Van Til arguing for all the details of Christian theism that are necessary for Christian orthodoxy, like the fact that Christ rose from the dead. This should indicate what Van Til means, and does not mean, by his phrase "Christian theism as a unit."

One other thing to note about Van Til's explanation of "Christian theism as a unit" quoted above is that he uses "Christianity" as short-hand for special, redemptive revelation in distinction from natural revelation about God's existence: "to the Scripture (Christianity) and with respect to the existence of God (theism)." In this context, Van Til's use of the word "Christianity" does not mean that he trying to prove every detail of Christian theology, just the absolutely authoritative nature of redemptive revelation. (There must be some detail of course. There can't be a "that" without a "what.") This is consistent with the context, and the suggestion will become more of a firm conclusion as we continue to look into Van Til's views.

In Van Til's terminology, the opposite of treating "Christian theism as a unit" is the "block-house methodology." The next section of the chapter just discussed in *The Defense of the Faith* has "block-house methodology" as the title. Looking at what Van Til means by this phrase will help explain what he means by CTU. In keeping with Frame's view of what CTU means, does Van Til condemn the block-house methodology as a use of more than a single argument to prove all the details of Christian theism? The answer, as we'll see, is "no."

Van Til explains "block-house methodology" by saying, "the Roman Catholic and Arminian method of reasoning is bound, not merely to cut the unity of Christian theism in two, but is bound even to prove its theism piece by piece. Romanism and Arminianism

lead not merely to dualism but to atomism.”⁷⁶ This is in contrast to the Reformed Protestant method of reasoning in which, “No proposition about historical fact is presented for what it really is till it is presented as a part of the system of Christian theism that is contained in Scripture. To say this is involved in the consideration that all facts of the created universe are what they are by virtue of the plan of God with respect to them.”⁷⁷ Van Til then launches into a lengthy philosophical discussion about why the non-Christian view of the one and the many undermines the possibility of rationality. He points out that:

[E]ven 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.⁷⁸

Once again, the issue for Van Til is the one and the many. His criticism of the non-Christian view of the one and the many is that individual facts cannot be compared to other individual facts if all the facts are not part of a unified system of facts, and the unified system of facts cannot be a blank that destroys all individuality.⁷⁹ In contrast, the Christian does not have to hold to the “truths of fact” at the expense of the “truths of reason” because the Christian God is self-contained – meaning that His all-encompassing plan for the universe includes the individuals and the universals in eternal relation to each other.⁸⁰ Thus, he concludes, “It is the actual existence of the God of Christian theism and the infallible authority of the Scripture which speaks to sinners of this God that must be

⁷⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 133.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 134.

taken as the precondition of the intelligibility of any fact in the world.”⁸¹ As the source of all universals and particulars, God is absolutely authoritative when He speaks concerning any facts (particulars) and their meaning (universals). *It’s the unity between the absolute Creator who must exist for the intelligibility of facts, on the one hand, and His absolute authority to speak concerning the meaning of all facts on the other hand, especially through Scripture, that Van Til is referring to by his phrase “Christian theism as a unit.”*

How is the Arminian and Roman Catholic approach to apologetics a “block-house” methodology and inconsistent with a self-contained God and Christian theism as a unit as Van Til has described? He says,

It is the essence of both the Romanist and the Arminian method of argumentation to agree with the non-Christian that individual propositions about many dimensions of reality are true whether Christianity is true or not. Neither Roman Catholics nor Arminian apologists are in a position to challenge the natural man’s atomistic procedure. Their own theologies are atomistic.⁸²

In other words, the Romanist and Arminian concede to the non-Christian that humans could have knowledge of various mundane areas of life even if God does not exist, or can be properly understood even if there were no Bible. They claim that it’s just “religious” knowledge that requires us to depend on the Bible to give us the correct understanding. But Van Til is saying that, because no facts of any sort would be intelligible unless they were created by an absolute God according to His comprehensive plan for the world, we must submit to this God’s interpretation regarding all facts of all types. Once again, we see that the issue of Christian theism as a unit versus the block-house methodology is a recognition of the implications of the transcendental proof for the existence of God for an absolutely authoritative revelation. A fact is what it is and means what it means because God has made it so. Van Til never says that he is arguing against the use of multiple arguments as the means of proving all the details of Christian theism. He is arguing

⁸¹ Ibid., 135.

⁸² Ibid., 139.

against deformed views of Christian apologetics by demanding that the implications of one argument, the transcendental argument, be honored when the various empirical arguments are given in defense of the Christian faith. Empirical evidence for Christian theism must be presented in terms of a Christian-theistic philosophy of fact in which facts are intelligible only because they are God-created, God-interpreted facts.

To make sure that we are not making a hasty generalization from this one discussion in *The Defense of the Faith* to describing Van Til's thinking in general about "Christian theism as a unit," let's look at another book. At the end of the last chapter of *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* Van Til offers this summary of the position for which he has been arguing:

These most important matters were somewhat as follows: First of all, we note the necessity of seeing clearly that Christianity and theism are intricately woven. If one is really a theist he cannot stop short of being a Christian, and Christianity cannot build upon any foundation but that of a sound biblical theism. Accordingly, the argument must constantly be for Christian theism as a whole. We cannot separate, except for the sake of emphasis, between an argument for theism and an argument for Christianity. The absoluteness of God and the inspiration of the Bible are involved in one another and one cannot defend the one without defending the other.⁸³

This line seems to prove Frame's interpretation of Van Til right: "If one is really a theist he cannot stop short of being a Christian." But when we look at the context again, it's "the inspiration of the Bible" that depends on the same argument that proves "the absoluteness of God." Of course, the inspired Bible will give us all the details of Christian theism, but it's not every one of those details that has transcendental necessity, but the fact of an absolutely true message that is inspired by the absolute God. We have another example here of "Christianity" being used as short-hand for special, redemptive revelation.

⁸³ *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 222.

This paragraph is a summary of a previous argument, as indicated by his statement that “These most important matters were somewhat as follows.” Going back a page and looking at the argument that Van Til is referring to confirms the interpretation just given:

To be sure, it is true that we should never seek to defend more than it is strictly necessary to defend. But our contention is exactly that it is strictly necessary to defend the absoluteness of Scripture. If one does not defend the absoluteness of Scripture, one cannot defend the absoluteness of Christ or of God. . . . The whole dispute between theism and atheism as far as the subject of knowledge is concerned is whether the human consciousness can or cannot function apart from God. If we now conclude that it cannot function apart from God, then when it functions it is wholly reinterpetative in its work. And if then, because of sin, the redemptive work of God is necessary, as according to Christianity it is, it follows that when the human consciousness functions in connection with this redemptive work of God, it must once more be wholly reinterpetative and therefore be wholly submissive to the Absolute interpretation which comes to it.⁸⁴

Once again, Van Til’s argument for “Christian theism as a unit” is an argument from the absolute God to the absoluteness of His revealed word in the interpretation of facts.

Could Van Til have been clearer if he meant to say what I am claiming? Yes, but of course Van Til is notorious for using some confusing phrases, like his denial of “identity of content between the mind of man and the mind of God,”⁸⁵ while also affirming that “two times two are four is a well known fact. God knows it. Man knows it.”⁸⁶ Other phrases in Van Til’s writing have caused a similar confusion, but they can be seen to make sense when examined closer. Likewise with CTU. Despite the fact that the phrase “Christian theism as a unit” would initially lead one to think it means what Frame

⁸⁴ Ibid., 221.

⁸⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 165. In context “identity of content” means that man’s knowledge is exhaustive, like God’s. Van Til’s use of this phrase was part of the Clark/Van Til controversy.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 172.

says it means, to prove everything about Christianity with one argument, one should be open to the possibility that the CTU phrase will appear in a different light once the context of its use is examined, as I believe I have begun to show.

Two other teachings in Van Til's writings add support to the interpretation I have given to the CTU phrase: 1) Van Til's association of TAG with natural revelation rather than the additional knowledge given through special revelation, and 2) the essential role that Van Til gives to empirical evidence in the defense of Christianity.

TAG as Natural Revelation

Van Til holds the traditional view that the means of salvation is only made known through special revelation. Yet Van Til also holds that the transcendental argument only proves that which is given through natural revelation, so such essential doctrines to Christian orthodoxy like the atonement and the resurrection of Christ would not be revealed through the transcendental argument. This contradicts Frame's claim that Van Til required the whole of Christian Theism to be proved by a single transcendental argument.

In his book *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til discusses, well, systematically, the issue of what God reveals by natural revelation compared to special revelation:

Coming now to what man would learn about God directly from God himself instead of indirectly from a study of nature and man, we may say that *whatever was not involved in the concept of God as the presupposition of the universe as it was when it was created had to be directly revealed to man if he was to know it at all.*⁸⁷

Thus we see that, both with respect to nature and respect to man himself, men should have known God as Creator, as Preserver, and as Judge. They should have known his divinity. They should have known him as the Absolute One. They should have known him as the one through whom alone all human

⁸⁷ Ibid., 74, emphasis in original.

predication, applied either to nature or to man, has meaning. They should have known him as the presupposition of the intelligibility of the universe.⁸⁸

We see here that Van Til is *equating* what can be known through the presuppositional argument, i.e. what is necessary for human predication to have meaning, to what is known about God through nature, which is less than the full revelation that is given through special revelation. He is not claiming to prove “every detail of Christian theism” through this one argument as Frame alleges.

The traditional Christian view is that nature does not reveal the way of salvation, and Van Til strongly affirms this in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*:

It is indeed true that nature does not reveal God’s grace to man. This objective insufficiency of present general revelation is plainly taught by Paul. The whole argument of the first few chapters of Romans establishes the fact that all “righteousness” which is of men, whether among Jews or Gentiles, places all under the condemnation of God and that in general revelation there is no remedy for this condition. Men are lost without Christ – and he is not revealed in nature. . . . It is true that nature does not reveal grace to us, but it is also true that man, as he was originally created, did not need grace. . . . In consequence of his sin, then, man needs both new or additional revelation – a revelation of grace.⁸⁹

There should be no doubt that, as a founding member of the conservative Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Van Til affirms that the means of grace, such as Christ’s death for our sins, involve doctrines that are necessary for orthodoxy. And since Van Til associates the presuppositional argument with natural revelation, Van Til does not hold that the presuppositional argument is supposed to entail all the doctrines necessary for Christian orthodoxy. Van Til warns against attempting to do such a thing:

We may therefore speak of the “system of truth” contained in Scripture if only we are careful to note that *its various doctrines are not to be obtained by way of*

⁸⁸ Ibid., 106

⁸⁹ Ibid., 111.

deduction from some master concept. There is no doubt consonance between the “doctrine of God,” the “doctrine of man” and the “doctrine of Christ” as found in Scripture. But even when conjoined and seen in their fullest harmony, these and other doctrines together do not begin to exhaust the riches of God’s revelation to man through Christ and his Spirit.⁹⁰

We will see that Van Til does deduce some concepts from the “master concept” of a self-contained God, but much less than all those doctrines necessary for Christian orthodoxy. God’s revelation is voluntary, including His revelation in nature in that God freely chose to create nature: “The ontological trinity is wholly complete within itself. The works of God within do not require the works of God without. The revelation of God in creation and providence is wholly voluntary.”⁹¹ But choosing to create the universe meant that those attributes of God necessary for the facts of the universe to be intelligible would necessarily be revealed to any mind that had the capacity and inclination to consider the matter.⁹² Through nature, God is known truly, but not exhaustively: “Saving grace is not manifest in nature; yet it is the God of saving grace who manifests himself by means of nature.”⁹³ Van Til says of Adam in Paradise, “he knew the nature of God as far as it had been revealed to him. . . . He needed not to know about God comprehensively to know him truly.”⁹⁴ Other attributes of God could be revealed after creation at God’s discretion in special revelation: “As God’s plans and purposes of salvation were increasingly realized and made plain to his people, he revealed more of himself to man.”⁹⁵ For Adam to know God comprehensively would have required Adam to know everything – to be God. Therefore for man to have knowledge and yet be finite, man must be able to know

⁹⁰ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1967), 7, emphasis added.

⁹¹ Cornelius Van Til, “Introduction” to *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* by Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948), 35.

⁹² Natural revelation also includes concepts that are innately planted in man that involuntarily spring up within him. See Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 194-95.

⁹³ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 29.

⁹⁴ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 100. Of course, even with a completed Bible, we can’t know God exhaustively, since we are finite and he is infinite.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

things without knowing everything about them. Van Til points out over and over again that this view of man's knowledge must be maintained to allow for the Creator/creature distinction and at the same time to allow the creature to receive knowledge from God.⁹⁶ Frame's characterization of Van Til unnecessarily presents him as contradictory on this major issue.

In *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, after having introduced the distinction between what can be known through "the concept of God as the presupposition of the universe"⁹⁷ on the one hand, and the additional revelation that can only be found in special revelation on the other hand, Van Til sets out to explain in the chapters that immediately follow what can be known through nature using a presuppositional reasoning process. He says, "We would think of a man in the midst of heathendom and remember the elements in the revelation at his disposal in order then to see what logical conclusions he ought to draw if he reasoned correctly."⁹⁸ Van Til then lists six logical conclusions that man ought to deduce from nature after the Fall:⁹⁹ 1) The existence of God as a Creator, 2) the providence of God, 3) common grace, 4) man's fall from original perfection, 5) special grace somewhere in the world, and 6) a final judgment.¹⁰⁰ This is an impressive list of deductions that line up with Biblical revelation, but it is hardly "the

⁹⁶ Cf. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 36; *The New Modernism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1947), 291; *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), 16, 135; *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 147-48; *Christian Apologetics*, 35.

⁹⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 74.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

⁹⁹ God could have chosen to create mankind so that we always freely chose the good and never evil. See *Ibid.*, 248. But given that man fell into sin, and given that God chose not to immediately send all mankind (the two of them) into eternal damnation, mankind must have continued only by grace: "It is not a valid argument against this contention to say that no one could in advance of its coming argue for the necessity of a gift of grace, since grace is a free gift. We do not say that men ought to have been able to argue in advance that grace should come. We say rather that the world did as a matter of fact exist in the way that it did by virtue of grace alone as soon as it fell into sin." *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 80. Also see Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 69-70; Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 21; and Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 106, 107.

whole of Christian theism” or even the whole of Christian orthodoxy. One might find other deductions that Van Til makes from TAG, but whether the deduction of those implications is considered “one argument” with the proof for God’s existence or multiple arguments, they still cannot be viewed as proving every element of Christian Theism since Van Til associates them with natural revelation as opposed to special revelation.

Although associating Van Til’s TAG with natural revelation is probably a novel idea to anyone who follows Frame’s view that Van Til’s apologetic is about proving the whole content of Biblical revelation, the association fits with the more limited scope of Van Til’s argument. His argument is about the intelligibility of facts – any facts whatsoever. The existence of God is necessary for any fact to be intelligible. So correctly reasoning about any of the facts of creation that confront any person in creation should lead that person to conclude that there is a Creator, just as Romans 1 affirms. Van Til outlines some implications that this has for man’s moral state and a need for salvation, but the argument directly concerns knowledge of facts in general and not the means of salvation.

But doesn’t Van Til talk about the priority of Scripture in our understanding of God? Yes, he does. But he talks about a sense in which nature has priority in a sense as well:

But to speak thus of the necessity and priority of Scripture is not in the least to deny that there is, in another sense, a priority of the works of God.¹⁰¹

We may say that the doctrine of creation and of providence form the foundation of the idea of Scripture. But on the other hand we should know nothing about the truth of creation and providence if it were not the Scripture as God’s Word that tells us of them.¹⁰²

There is a temporal priority of nature in that God created the world that reveals His glory before there was a need for redemptive revelation. Also, the need for redemptive

¹⁰¹ Van Til, *The Protestant Doctrine of Scripture*, 123-24.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 29.

revelation only makes sense in terms of an absolute Creator as the one against whom man has rebelled. And third, Scripture comes to us through nature – through men created in God’s image who receive a message verified by miracles in nature, and through the physical preservation of the inscribed divine message through earthly history. All of these require an absolute God to be the Creator and Sustainer of nature, man and history: “Surely there could be no inspiration in the sense in which Warfield describes it unless God’s providence is what he thinks of it as being, i.e., that which controls all of history, and of each man as a particular contribution to history.”¹⁰³ Per the transcendental argument, only because God created the facts of nature and the human personalities through which Scripture is delivered do these facts and human personalities have any meaning. The only alternative is a void in which man “has no self.”¹⁰⁴

On the other hand, there is a sense in which the Scriptures have priority because of the sinfulness of man. Although men ought to see clear proof of the existence of the true God in nature, we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” (Rom 1:18) We need redemptive revelation to come so that we acknowledge what we ought to see about God through His creation. Therefore nobody will have reasoned according to the transcendental argument to come to the six propositions that Van Til deduces from nature without having read the Bible or heard it preached to him: “Believers accept this view of God because they accept the Scriptures to be the Word of God. They have not first worked up a philosophy of theism in order to find this theism afterwards corroborated by scriptural teaching.”¹⁰⁵ And, “Christ said that no man can come to the Father but by Him. No one can become a theist unless he becomes a Christian.”¹⁰⁶ And:

God continued to reveal himself in nature as the self-sufficient and self-subsistent rational God even after man became a sinner. If therefore men would reason analogically they should be able to reason from nature to nature’s God. But

¹⁰³ Ibid., 25.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰⁶ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 36.

sinner until saved by grace do not reason analogically. They reason univocally.¹⁰⁷

We don't turn to the Bible to get our salvation after having come to acknowledge God through a study of nature in isolation from Biblical revelation. Rather, "We get our theism as well as our Christianity from the Bible."¹⁰⁸ This last statement, it should be noted, follows his affirmation of a distinction between his philosophical argument for theism and the defense of Christ's resurrection and other historical claims of Christianity: "It is apparent from this that if we would really defend Christianity as an historical religion we must at the same time defend the theism upon which Christianity is based and this involves us in philosophical discussion."¹⁰⁹ So again, the scope of TAG is limited to a philosophical discussion about the theism upon which Christianity is based, and on the basis of this we can present empirical arguments for the historic details of Christian revelation.

In *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* Van Til says: "The Bible must be true because it alone speaks of an absolute God. And equally true is it that we believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one."¹¹⁰ In the first sentence we are validating the Bible based on a conception of an absolute God. Why is that? Because TAG proves the necessary existence of such a God for the possibility of rationality: "unless there were an absolute God their [unbelievers'] own questions and doubts would have no meaning at all."¹¹¹ Van Til recognizes that this philosophical way of arguing for the existence of God will lead some to a mistaken understanding: "[S]ome fundamentalists may have feared that we have been trying to build up a sort of Christian philosophy without the Bible."¹¹² But the opponent of Christianity who sees TAG as "prejudiced" by the Bible will be more correct:

¹⁰⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 101.

¹⁰⁸ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 24.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 12.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 11.

¹¹² Ibid.

The position we have briefly sought to outline is frankly taken from the Bible. And this applies especially to the central concept of the whole position, viz., the concept of an absolute God. Nowhere else in human literature, we believe, is the concept of an absolute God presented. And this fact is once more intimately related to the fact that nowhere else is there a conception of sin, such as that presented in the Bible. According to the Bible, sin has set man at enmity against God. Consequently it has been man's endeavor to get away from the idea of God, that is, a truly absolute God.¹¹³

We need to learn of the absolute Creator through the redemptive revelation of Scripture because in our sinfulness we suppress the truth about God revealed in nature (cf. Rom 1:18-32). Thus the second sentence above is that "we believe in an absolute God because the Bible tells us of one."

Even though Van Til often says things like his "starting point" is the "self-attesting Christ of Scripture,"¹¹⁴ this should not be understood as giving salvation logical priority over the doctrine of God in his philosophical apologetic. Christ is self-attesting in Scripture because He is the eternal, self-sufficient God. God as He is in Himself rather than in relation to creation and man is the center of theology and apologetics for Van Til:

[I]t should always be remembered that Christ's work is a means to an end. Even if we think of the fact that Christ is the second person of the Trinity, we ought still to remember that it is the full Godhead with whom we ultimately have to do and about whom, in the last analysis, we wish to know. Hence, theology is primarily God centered rather than Christ centered."¹¹⁵

Van Til often talks about the transcendental necessity of the ontological trinity and not the transcendental necessity of the economical Trinity because the center of his

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Van Til, "My Credo" in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Philosophy and Theology of Cornelius Van Til*, edited by E. R. Geehan. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 3.

¹¹⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 2.

philosophy and theology is God as He is in Himself rather than in relation to the world.¹¹⁶ He criticizes James Daane because “he would substitute ‘the revelation of God in Christ’ for the ontological trinity as ‘the Christian’s most basic interpretation.’”¹¹⁷ He likewise criticizes Karl Barth because his “main principle is ‘the revelation of God in Christ’ to the exclusion of the God who exists from all eternity within himself, independently of his relation to the world.”¹¹⁸ Van Til’s transcendental argument proves the existence of a self-contained God, on which the meaning of Christ’s historical redemption logically depends.

The one and the many is the issue on which Van Til builds his transcendental argument: “The whole problem of knowledge has constantly been that of bringing the one and the many together.”¹¹⁹ As we saw above, Van Til’s basic argument is that God’s existence is necessary as the precondition for rationality because in God the one and the many are equally ultimate. He refers to this aspect of God’s nature that is transcendently necessary in various ways: “the self-contained God,” “the self-sufficient God,” “the originality of God,” “the absolute God,” “the concrete universal,” “the Eternal One and Many,” and others.¹²⁰ As the source of all that exists and the precondition for rationality, Van Til sees this type of God as the center of Scripture and the Christian faith:

. . . [T]he content of Scripture, the system of truth centering in the ideas of God as self-contained and of his plan for the universe which controls whatsoever comes to pass.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 410.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 411.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 10. See Rousas John Rushdoony, “The One and the Many – The Contribution of Van Til,” in *Jerusalem and Athens*, 339-48.

¹²⁰ “Self-sufficient”: See Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 102. “Originality”: See Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 205; Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 69. For “Absolute,” “Concrete universal” and “Eternal One and Many”: See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 42.

¹²¹ Van Til, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 32.

We use the term Theism to signify biblical Theism, of which we take the notion of an absolute, self-sufficient, personal God to be the central metaphysical concept.¹²²

In the Reformed Faith the freedom of God, the self-contained God, is central to everything.¹²³

[O]nly in Reformed theology does one find an attempt to take the fundamental motif of Scripture, the self-contained ontological trinity, and understand all the teachings of Scripture in terms of that motif. It is because of this unique conception of God that the doctrines of Scripture such as creation, fall, covenant, redemption, etc., take on their particular Reformed structure which speaks first and always of the glory of God.¹²⁴

The following passage is possibly Van Til's best succinct statement of his argument for Christian theism:

[Calvinists] offer an interpretation of life in its totality on the basis of the principle Scripture offers. That principle is the ontological trinity. In answer to his challenge, we would tell Gilson that, unless he is willing with us to interpret nature and all things else in terms of the ontological trinity, he can get no meaning into human experience. The interpretations of the natural reason, made by the aid of abstract principles and brute facts can, in the nature of the case, lead with rationalism (Parmenides) into a universal validity that is empty of content, or with empiricism (Heraclitus) to a particularism that has no universality, or to a phenomenism that is a compromise between these two positions and shares the weaknesses of both.¹²⁵

¹²² Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1955), 34n.1.

¹²³ Van Til, *The New Modernism*, 387.

¹²⁴ Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*, 76-77.

¹²⁵ Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 63-64.

Notice that there is one particular doctrine of Scripture, one particular aspect of God's nature, that Van Til uses to prove a Christian view of reality. The ontological trinity is contrasted with non-Christian views of the one and the many, of which there are only three options: the rationalist view that all is one, the empiricist view that all is many, and the Kantian/phenomenalist view that an abstract one and abstract many should be combined to explain the intelligible world.¹²⁶

Van Til sees his mission as defending the Reformed faith as expressed in the historic creeds.¹²⁷ While not every doctrine within those creeds can be proven as a transcendental necessity, Van Til's TAG is a defense of the Reformed faith in particular in the sense that TAG proves the doctrine most associated with the Reformed faith, the sovereignty of God, arguing that the only alternative to an absolutely sovereign God, one who determines whatsoever comes to pass, is pure irrationalism.

But Frame claims that there is not one center in Van Til's philosophy: "There are, of course, various doctrines that Van Til considers central or crucial to the Christian system. However, these are indeed various; there are many 'centers'!"¹²⁸ Frame lists the historical fall, temporal creation, predestination, and the Trinity as various centers. However, each of these relate to the one issue of God being the ultimate one and many. Regarding the historical fall, Van Til says that, "There could be no evil in God; evil would have destroyed God's self-sufficiency. Accordingly, evil must have come in by the hand of man."¹²⁹ For Van Til, God's "self-sufficiency" means that God is the ultimate One and Many: "God, as self-sufficient, as the One in whom the One and the Many are equally ultimate."¹³⁰ Temporal creation means that all laws (one) and facts

¹²⁶ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 38, 42-43; *Christianity and Barthianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1962), 204-05.

¹²⁷ "Now the basic structure of my thought is very simple. . . . 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." Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 23.

¹²⁸ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 173.

¹²⁹ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 80.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

(many) are under God's control.¹³¹ Predestination is true because God, as the one who determines all facts (the many) and the concepts that apply to them (the one), "has definitively interpreted every fact, including the condemnation of the lost, before the foundation of the world," to quote Frame's own words.¹³² As I'll explain further below, the doctrine of the "ontological Trinity" that Van Til often refers to means that the one and the many are equally ultimate in God.¹³³

In *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til discusses several of the attributes of God. True to form, he emphasizes God's self-sufficiency in discussing the various divine attributes. Specifically, he frames his discussion of the divine attributes in terms of defending the "originality of God," meaning that He is the "absolute" origin of all unity and diversity in the universe, "while everything with respect to man is derivative."¹³⁴ Some of the attributes that he discusses, like aseity, understanding, wisdom and holiness, he largely equates with God's originality. As the origin of all that exists, God is the source of all being, knowledge and ethics, which tell us a lot about what it means for God to have these attributes, especially in contrast to secular worldviews, which don't see being, knowledge and ethics as having their origin completely in God.

Other attributes cannot be deduced solely from God's originality, but given that God is the origin of all unity and plurality, some implications for those attributes and how God operates will logically follow. We have already seen how God's decision to extend grace to sinners was not necessary, which means the redemptive revelation of the Bible was not necessary; but since God is absolutely authoritative, it follows that God's words in the Bible will necessarily be absolutely authoritative.

Van Til devotes an entire chapter to the Trinity in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*. Of course, Van Til relates the Trinity to the issue of the one and the many and why God's existence is necessary as the precondition for rationality. He says that we "offer this triune God without apology as the only possible presupposition for the

¹³¹ See *ibid.*, 22-23, 187.

¹³² Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 88.

¹³³ Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism*, 132.

¹³⁴ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 205.

possibility of predication.”¹³⁵ Yet – and this will surprise many people – there is no instance in which Van Til argues that three is the necessary number of Persons in the Godhead to account for the intelligibility of facts.¹³⁶ God’s triune nature means that the one and the many are equally ultimate, but how many compose the “many” is irrelevant to the transcendental argument. Any time Van Til mentions the necessity of the ontological Trinity, his argument concerns the equal ultimacy of the one and the many, and nothing about the necessity of threeness, such as in this statement: “[T]he Christian church has in its doctrine of the Trinity not a useless super-additum, but that it forms the foundation of philosophy and theology. In the Trinity unity and plurality live in eternal harmony.”¹³⁷ Since the particular number of plural persons in the Godhead cannot be deduced from the transcendental argument, that there are three persons can only be known through Scripture.

As to why God exists in three persons rather than some other plural number, we would have to go to Scripture, if it is even revealed there. We find in Scripture the distinct jobs that each of the three persons perform. I can’t think of a job that a fourth person would be needed to perform, but I can’t say that there could only be jobs for three persons in the Godhead. In his chapter on the Trinity in *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, Van Til briefly reviews the orthodox view of what the Bible teaches about the persons of the Trinity, but then he says that there is still “a mystery that is beyond our comprehension”¹³⁸ concerning the Trinity. The question of why God would exist as three persons receives a partial answer in the equal ultimacy of the one and the many, but that does not answer the question of why three rather than some other plural number:

¹³⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹³⁶ The lack of transcendental necessity for threeness in the Godhead may be why Frame is justified to have doubts about the profundity of analyzing everything in terms of triads: “How is perspectivalism useful? There are some moments when I think it is a kind of deep structure of the universe and of Bible truth. Other times (most times) I think of it more modestly, as a pedagogical device.” John Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism,” (Revised May 14, 2008), http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2008Primer.htm (accessed 18 September 2010).

¹³⁷ Van Til, *Christianity and Idealism*, 132.

¹³⁸ Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 230.

So then, though we cannot tell why the Godhead should exist tri-personally, we can understand something of the fact, after we are told that God exists as a triune being, that the unity and the plurality of this world has back of it a God in whom unity and plurality are equally ultimate. Thus we may say that this world, in some of its aspects at least, shows analogy to the Trinity.¹³⁹

Another example of a doctrine that can't be deduced from God's self-sufficiency but is colored by it would be God's plan to become incarnate. The plan is not something known through natural revelation, but given the incarnation, we are bound to view it in a particular way based on the transcendental argument. The incarnation cannot be seen as God lowering Himself on the Greek scale of being, or in terms of the Kantian freedom-nature scheme. The distinction between the Creator as the eternal one-and-many and the creature as the derivative, temporal one-and-many must be maintained in the nature of the incarnate Christ, as Van Til says the Chalcedon Creed teaches:

[T]he principle of unity and the principle of diversity as it finds expression in the Chalcedon creed and in the theology of the Reformers who accepted this creed, is rejected by both men in terms of the principle of unity and diversity as required by the notion of the freedom-nature scheme of modern would-be autonomous man.¹⁴⁰

In *Christian Apologetics* Van Til makes the point that how we view sin involves how we view God and the incarnation, even though the first is a matter of transcendental necessity and the latter is a matter of historical proof:

Apologetics does deal with theism more than it deals with Christianity, and evidences does deal with Christianity more than it deals with theism. For that reason, too, apologetics deals mostly with philosophy and evidences deals mostly with facts. But the whole matter is a question of emphasis.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Van Til, *The Case for Calvinism*, 59; also see *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 226.

That the whole question can be no more than one of emphasis and never one of separation is due to the fact that Christian theism is a unit. Christianity and theism are implied in one another. If we ask, e.g., why Christ came into the world, the answer is that he came to save his people from their sins, but what is sin? It is “Any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.” And who or what is God?

True, we have here given the orthodox doctrine of the work of Christ, and the orthodox definition of sin. But we could just as well give any other definition of the work of Christ and we should find that it always involves a certain concept of God. If we say that Christ came to set us a fine example of morality and no more, then we have redefined sin to mean some weakness inherent in human nature and therewith we have redefined God to be something less than that absolute and holy being which orthodox theology conceives him to be. Christianity can never be separated from some theory about the existence and the nature of God. The result is that Christian theism must be thought of as a unit.¹⁴¹

Since his point is that both philosophy and historical evidence are part of Christian apologetics, and philosophy deals more with “theism” and the latter deals more with “Christianity,” his mention of the “work of Christ” must be an example of something pertaining mainly to historical evidence; yet, he argues, how we view the earthly, historical work of Christ will be influenced by our philosophical assumptions. We cannot derive the work of Christ – all the historical events of Christ’s life - from a philosophical argument; that would make historical evidence irrelevant; but we are still bound to view the life of Christ in a particular way based on the transcendental argument.

In some “Retractions and Clarifications” Van Til says, “Apparently I have given occasion for people to think that I am speculative or philosophical first and biblical afterwards.”¹⁴² He wants to dispel that notion, saying, “Whatever measure of justification there may be for this charge, I would today certainly try to make it

¹⁴¹ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 1.

¹⁴² Van Til, *Toward a Reformed Apologetics* (Scarsdale, N.Y.: Westminster Discount Book Service, 1995 [1972]), 24.

abundantly clear that I speak about the ontological trinity only because it is taught in Scripture. It is, I would repeat, the self-attesting Christ of Scripture as our absolute authority, Who must instruct us on all things.”¹⁴³ This may seem like a repudiation of his earlier statements giving philosophical priority to God as He is in Himself and a transcendental argument that can’t prove the number of persons in the Trinity. But we have seen the sense in which we must begin with Scripture according to Van Til, which is consistent with his point here, and that this does not negate a sense in which Van Til is philosophical first, because there is a type of priority to the transcendental argument as part of natural revelation that reveals the God who gives meaning to all facts and who provides the necessary metaphysical basis for the historical drama of redemption recorded in the Bible. Van Til’s rejection of proving a general theism first by evidence and philosophical arguments and proving Christianity second must be understood in the autonomous sense of trying to understand God and the world apart from and contrary to His absolutely authoritative revelation (such as in terms of the Great Scale of Being), and then trying to prove the truth of Scripture on the basis of that autonomous foundation.¹⁴⁴

This survey of what Van Til does and does not attempt to prove by his transcendental argument shows that the argument has a singular focus, on God as the self-sufficient, ultimate one and many; and this has wide-ranging implications for Christian theology. In particular, TAG has implications for the doctrine of Scripture, which allows Van Til to speak of Christian theism as a unit, a unity between natural revelation about the Creator and special revelation about redemption; but Van Til does not see TAG as sufficient to prove every detail of what the Bible reveals, or even all the doctrines necessary for Christian orthodoxy. TAG concerns the character of God revealed through His creation in terms of proving the character that God must have in order to make any fact of creation intelligible, but this natural revelation is far less than all the information provided in special revelation.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁴⁴ See Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 131-132 under “Block-House Methodology.”

The Legitimate Role of Empirical Evidence in Van Til's Approach

That Van Til's use of the phrase "Christian theism as a unit" does not mean that he requires one argument to prove everything about Christian doctrine is also seen in Van Til endorsement of probabilistic, empirical evidence in the defense of the faith, including the use of such evidence to prove important issues like the canonicity of claims to divine revelation and the resurrection of Christ. This is in contrast to his rejection of probabilistic arguments for the existence of God in favor of the certainty of the transcendental argument:

To say that the evidence, when fully and fairly considered, merely shows that God probably exists, is tantamount to saying that he does not at all exist. The God of Christianity is the God whose counsel or plan is the source of possibility. The word possibility has no possible meaning except upon the presupposition of the existence of the self-contained ontological Trinity as the source of it.¹⁴⁵

However, not all arguments about the truth of Christian teaching are about the source of possibility in universe. By allowing probabilistic arguments in contexts other than those involving transcendental necessity, Van Til is implicitly recognizing that TAG cannot do all the apologetic work, contrary to Frame's claim. Frame notes Van Til's endorsement of empirical arguments to defend the faith.¹⁴⁶ But again, rather than finding a way to reconcile this with Van Til's phrase "Christian theism as a unit," Frame mentions it as an inconsistency between "Van Til's philosophical and strategic recommendations."¹⁴⁷

Philosophical and the Historical Evidential Weapons Should Support Each Other

The following passage is one example of Van Til's endorsement of probabilistic, historical evidence as a supplement to the philosophical argument. It follows the quote in the previous section about the "work of Christ" and how we view sin. Whereas Frame wants to characterize Van Til's approach as using one big apologetic gun of an argument

¹⁴⁵ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 114-15.

¹⁴⁶ Frame, *Cornelius Van Til*, 181.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

to prove the whole of Christian theism, in this passage Van Til characterizes the “vindication of Christian theism as a whole” as warfare by an army of soldiers with a variety of weapons. The atomic-powered transcendental argument (the “philosophical argument”) is the biggest, but still only one weapon among many:

We may, therefore, perhaps conceive of the vindication of Christian theism as a whole to modern warfare. There is bayonet fighting, there is rifle shooting, there are machine guns, but there are also heavy cannon and atom bombs. All the men engaged in these different kinds of fighting are mutually dependent upon one another. The rifle men could do very little if they did not fight under the protection of the heavy guns behind them. The heavy guns depend for the progress they make upon the smaller guns. So too with Christian theism. . . . Yet in defending the theistic foundation of Christianity we, in the nature of the case, deal almost exclusively with philosophical argument. In apologetics we shoot the big guns under the protection of which the definite advances in the historical field must be made. In short, there is an historical and there is a philosophical aspect to the defense of Christian theism. Evidences deals largely with the historical while apologetics deals largely with the philosophical aspect. Each has its own work to do but they should constantly be in touch with one another. If we are to defend Christian theism as a unit it must be shown that its parts are really related to one another.¹⁴⁸

Notice that Van Til calls for defending “Christian theism as a unit” in the immediate context of endorsing the need for historical evidence in addition to philosophic argument to defend Christian theism. At least in this case, “Christian theism as a unit” cannot mean what Frame claims that it means. The unity that Van Til is speaking of here is that any presentation of historical facts in defense of Christianity must be supported by a philosophy of fact that is consistent with and supportive of Christianity: “To interpret a fact of history involves a philosophy of history.”¹⁴⁹ Van Til’s main point in this paragraph is the interdependence of the different apologetic weapons. The stress on

¹⁴⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 1-2.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

interdependence seems to have caused some students of Van Til to overlook the fact that in this description he assigns a distinct and indispensable role to historical evidence in the defense of the faith.

Empirical Evidence to Prove Christ's Resurrection

A clear denial by Van Til that he intends for “the whole of Christian theism,” or the whole of Christian orthodoxy, to be proven by the transcendental argument is his statement that the resurrection of Christ must be proven by empirical evidence:

Historical apologetics is absolutely necessary and indispensable to point out that Christ arose from the grave, etc. But as long as historical apologetics works on a supposedly neutral basis it defeats its own purpose. For in that case it virtually grants the validity of the metaphysical assumptions of the unbeliever.¹⁵⁰

The job of the transcendental argument is to show the invalidity of the metaphysical assumptions of the unbeliever so that the historical evidence of Christ's resurrection will be seen in its proper context. As Thom Notaro explains in his book *Van Til & the Use of Evidence*, a faithful Jew living at the time Jesus walked the earth would not examine the evidence for Jesus' Messianic claims from a standpoint of religious neutrality. He would presuppose the existence of the God of the Bible and interpret the empirical evidence provided by Jesus in the light of God's previous revelation that predicted the Messiah.¹⁵¹ As the New Testament itself presents the case, Jesus is proven to be the Messiah because He fulfills the Old Testament predictions about the Messiah.

Van Til's approach provides only limited support to the recently-named “ramified natural theology” chiefly promoted by Richard Swinburne.¹⁵² It is defined as follows: “Ramified natural theology concerns arguments for or against distinctively Christian theism without appealing to the authority of divine revelation. . . . Analogous to a river

¹⁵⁰ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 146.

¹⁵¹ Thom Notaro, *Van Til & the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 109-123.

¹⁵² See Richard Swinburne, *The Resurrection of God Incarnate* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

that ramifies into multiple streams, a ‘ramified’ natural theology goes beyond generic theism (the river) and into more highly-specific theism, such as Christianity (a particular stream).”¹⁵³ We’ve seen that Van Til vigorously rejects generic theism in which God is a concept with no content, and he derives some specific doctrines from the nature of God that can be called the structure of Christian theism (e.g. the six doctrines listed above).¹⁵⁴ However, he would not have followed Swinburne in using ramified natural theology to calculate the probability of Jesus being the Messiah apart from Scriptural revelation, since Van Til holds that this information is only given in Scripture.¹⁵⁵

Empirical Evidence to Prove Canonicity

Van Til also discusses the necessary role of several empirical tests for proving the canonicity of a claim to revelation. In *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* Van Til lists the following tests for canonicity: The message does not contradict previous revelation, fulfillment of prophecy, theophany (which he equates with the morality of the prophet’s life), and miracles.¹⁵⁶ Except for the first one, these largely involve empirical investigation. Van Til points out that each of these three empirical tests would be incomplete in itself because each one could be true of a false prophecy.¹⁵⁷ Although failure of a prediction to come true proves that a prophecy is false (Deut 18:21–22), false prophets can perform miracles (apparent ones at least) and have predictions come to pass:

¹⁵³ Hugh G. Gauch, Jr., “The Methodology of Ramified Natural Theology,” *Philosophia Christi* (Vol. 15, No. 2, 2013), 283.

¹⁵⁴ See page 28, above.

¹⁵⁵ One essay in the recent edition of the *Philosophia Christi* journal that focused on ramified natural theology that Van Til could find much agreement with is an essay by Lydia McGrew, “Probabilistic Issues Concerning Jesus of Nazareth and Messianic Death Prophecies,” *Philosophia Christi* (Vol. 15, No. 2, 2013), 327. She makes the important apologetic point in reply to skeptics of miracles like David Hume that the plausibility of a miracle and its meaning depends on the context. Given the prophecies about the circumstances of the Messiah’s advent, one would expect the Messiah to arrive and perform miracles. See also on this point James Orr, *David Hume and His Influence on Philosophy and Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), 190-1.

¹⁵⁶ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 128-29. Also see Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 123.

¹⁵⁷ Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 128-29.

“[I]f the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, ‘Let us follow other gods’ (gods you have not known) ‘and let us worship them,’ you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer.” (Deut 13:2–3). Likewise, prophets usually exhibited godly lives, but Van Til points out there is the case of the lying prophet who later spoke a true prophecy (1 Kgs 13).¹⁵⁸ Consequently, “All of this shows clearly that prophecy must be considered as a body.”¹⁵⁹ These tests are “mutually corroborative.”¹⁶⁰

In the legal field this is often referred to as a “totality of the circumstances test.” An example of this kind of test is the determination of where you are legally domiciled. It usually involves a number of different sources of evidence: where you get your mail, the address on your drivers license, where you live most of the year, the geographical area of your employment, the location of items of sentimental value, and others. One area of evidence might indicate one place of domicile, while other pieces of evidence would indicate another place. The determination is based on the location having the greatest number of factors associated with it.

In contrast to the certainty that Van Til claims for the transcendental argument, these tests of canonicity involve uncertainty, especially at the beginning: “As far as the immediate appearance of the matter was concerned it was not always possible to distinguish clearly the true from the false.”¹⁶¹ But as evidence built up from the various mutually corroborative tests, “these tests would increase in clarity as time went on.”¹⁶²

In a rare case of Van Til failing to mention the transcendental issues involved in a philosophical concept, he says in this discussion that the test of new prophecies being logically consistent with previous prophecy is “a sufficient safeguard against such apparently true but really false prophecy.”¹⁶³ But this must be qualified by insights that Van Til makes in other places regarding the use of the law of contradiction. Van Til teaches that there can be unresolvable apparent contradictions in Scripture.¹⁶⁴ So, not

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 129.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 129.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁶² Ibid., 129.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 128.

¹⁶⁴ See Van Til, *Common Grace & the Gospel*, 9, 67, 165.

even logical consistency is a self-sufficient test. It would have to be used in corroboration with the other three tests.

The Westminster Confession of Faith lists various proofs for the truth of Scripture:

We may be moved and induced by 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, are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the Word of God.¹⁶⁵

One would expect Van Til to reject these multiple tests if Frame's characterization of him were true, but they are all compatible with Van Til's apologetic so long as they are seen as tests that are based on the presuppositions of the Christian theistic worldview rather than being seen as religiously neutral tests. Van Til explicitly endorses this section of the Westminster Confession: "The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks eloquently of the heavenly character, the consent of all the parts, etc., of Scripture."¹⁶⁶

Empirical Evidence for the Generally Reliable Transmission of the Autographa

Van Til also accepts probability rather than absolute certainty in determining the accurate transmission of the Scriptures:

That the Bible is the Word of God pertains only to the original autographs. The versions and translations may fairly be said to be faithful reproductions of the autographs. But they cannot be said to be exact replicas of them. . . . Do we not in any case have to rely on that which we think is *generally* reliable without its being *absolutely* infallible? In reply to this objection the following remarks are in order. There would be no *reasonably reliable* method of identifying the Word

¹⁶⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 1, section 5.

¹⁶⁶ Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 31; also see 33-34.

of God in human history unless human history itself is controlled by God. . . .
[I]t is not a matter of great worry if the transmissions are not altogether accurate reproductions of the originals. Then the very idea of “substantial accuracy” or “essential reliability” has its foundation in the complete control of history by God. Then it is proper and meaningful to say that God in his providence has provided for the essentially accurate transmission of the words of the original.¹⁶⁷

Although Van Til had some differences with Warfield concerning epistemology, with Warfield relying on Scottish Common Sense epistemology and Van Til rejecting it, in Van Til’s introduction to B.B. Warfield’s book on the inspiration of Scripture, Van Til endorses Warfield’s defense of the infallibility of the autographs only:

Through it all there is the contention that the Bible is, in its autographa, the infallible Word of God. It is not our purpose here to analyze or recapitulate that argument. The reader can see at a glance with what care and acumen it proceeds. It is our purpose rather to ask whether it is true, as is frequently asserted, that the day for such an argument has passed.¹⁶⁸

Van Til then defends the idea of infallibility against twentieth century philosophy through the remainder of the essay. This defense entails some disagreements with Warfield concerning epistemology, but Van Til does not point out his differences with Warfield in this essay introducing Warfield’s book. He reserves that for other publications. Van Til concludes his essay with another endorsement of Warfield’s position on the infallibility of the autographs only: “Only in a return to the Bible as infallibly inspired in its autography is there hope for science, for philosophy and for theology.”¹⁶⁹

Warfield raised a lot of fears that he was giving away the farm in regard to the inerrancy of Scripture when he was the first Princeton theologian to reject the authenticity of the ending of Mark found in the Textus Receptus on the basis of German

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 27-28, emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁸ Cornelius Van Til, “Introduction” to *The Inspiration and Authority of Scripture* by Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1948), 3-4.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 68.

textual criticism.¹⁷⁰ By endorsing Warfield's position on the infallibility of the autographs only, Van Til endorsed the empirical procedure by which Warfield came to his conclusion, and likely agreed with the conclusion itself.¹⁷¹

Thus Van Til's position on the transmission of the Bible can be described as follows: While a God that completely controls history necessarily exists as the precondition for rationality, that necessity does not apply to the accurate transmission of every one of His words through the course of history. God's complete control of history allows for the substantial reliability of the Scriptures handed down through history.

One follower of Van Til has taken Van Til's rejection of neutrality in a direction he did not, by denying the validity of textual criticism of the Bible. He argues that the autographs, the "Received Text" that the church has used throughout its history, should be regarded as inerrant since textual criticism is not a presuppositionally neutral science.¹⁷² But just as there can be a science of the weather that gives us reasonably accurate results, even though, like everything else in God's world, it is not a neutral science, so we can have an empirical science of textual transmission that recognizes and excludes unchristian presuppositions. The distinction between God-honoring textual criticism and God-denying textual criticism can be characterized, respectively, as the distinction between "lower criticism" and "higher criticism." A Christian might argue for the inerrancy of the autographs merely from the teaching of the Bible about itself (e.g. Matt. 5:18); but this would be a presuppositional argument in the intrasystemic sense only, not in the intersystemic sense of defeating another worldview, as I explain further below.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Kim Riddlebarger, *The Lion of Princeton: Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield on Apologetics, Theological Method and Polemics*, <http://kimriddlebarger.squarespace.com/b-b-warfield-the-lion-of-pr/edited-lionofprinceton.pdf>, 36-45.

¹⁷¹ Greg Bahnsen followed Warfield and Van Til on the inerrancy of the autographs only: Greg L. Bahnsen, "The Inerrancy of the Autographa," in *Inerrancy* (ed. Norman L. Geisler; Grand Rapids, 1980), 151-193.

¹⁷² P. Andrew Sandlin, "The Errancy of the 'Inerrancy of the Original Autographs' Theory," in Rousas John Rushdoony and P. Andrew Sandlin, *Infallibility and Interpretation* (Vallecito, CA: Chalcedon Foundation, 2000), Appendix 3. He cites Van Til for this on page 95, and the book is dedicated to Van Til.

¹⁷³ Page 53. Charles Quarrels argues against this claim, saying that the words "pass away" and "destroy" in Matthew 5:17-18 refer to loss of authority, not loss of a letter or stroke in the copying process. Charles

Boa and Bowman's Mischaracterization

In their book *Faith Has Its Reasons* Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman cite the following passage (and only this passage) as proof that Van Til “flatly rejected” probabilistic, empirical evidence in apologetics:¹⁷⁴

Over against this contention that theoretically any hypothesis is as relevant as any other, we place the Christian position which says that no hypotheses which exclude the necessary self-existence of the triune God of Scripture can be relevant to any group of facts. There is only one absolutely true explanation of every fact and of every group of facts in the universe. God has this absolutely true explanation of every fact. Accordingly, the various hypotheses that are to be relevant to the explanation of phenomena must be consistent with this fundamental presupposition. *God's self-existence is the presupposition of the relevancy of any hypothesis.* If one should seek to explain the claim of the disciples of Jesus that their Master's body was raised from the tomb by offering the hypothesis of hallucination, we reply that the hypothesis is irrelevant. Our further study of the factual evidence in the matter is no more than a corroboration of our assertion of the irrelevancy of such an hypothesis. If one offers the hypothesis of biological evolution as the explanation of man's appearance on the earth, we reply that the hypothesis is irrelevant. Our further study of the factual material is no more than a corroboration of our assertion of the irrelevancy of this hypothesis.¹⁷⁵

We have seen where Van Til denies that Christ's resurrection can be deduced from the transcendental necessity of God's self-existence, but here Van Til is claiming that somehow the hallucination explanation of the resurrection excludes “the necessary self-existence of the triune God of Scripture.” The resolution of this apparent contradiction

Quarrels, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 95.

¹⁷⁴ Kenneth D. Boa and Robert M. Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons: Integrative Approaches to Defending the Christian Faith* (Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2006), 476.

¹⁷⁵ Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences*, 56-57, emphasis in original.

can be found in observing that, in context, Van Til is only speaking about those who reject the self-existent God and the Scriptures that provide the “absolutely true explanation of every fact” and that provide the only way that sinful men come to acknowledge the self-existent God. He does not have in mind someone looking at the evidence in a God-honoring way – comparing Christ’s words and deeds to the Old Testament predictions about the Messiah as Notaro, cited above, explains. So Van Til is saying that, given the strong match between the Scriptural predictions of what would happen when the Messiah came on the one hand, and the empirical evidence for what Jesus did (the circumstances of His birth, His teaching, His prophetic predictions, miracles, various evidence for the resurrection itself) on the other hand, the conclusion that Jesus was resurrected is so overwhelming that the hallucination explanation could only carry significant weight with someone who rejected biblical authority (even though, he says, we may “further study the factual evidence” anyway to corroborate our conclusion derived by other means). The hallucination explanation can only have enough weight to be persuasive against Jesus’ messianic claims if God’s revelation in the Old Testament is bracketed out in an irrational attempt at religious neutrality.

This understanding is confirmed by Van Til’s mention of evolution as a parallel illustration to the hallucination explanation of the resurrection. Van Til regards the debate between creation and evolution as not merely an issue of what the scientific facts show, but a debate between two “mutually exclusive philosophies of life”:

Creation is, we believe, the only philosophy of origins that does not destroy human reason itself. It is really not a question as to which position is more reasonable. Evolution and creation give no quarter and expect no quarter. They are bound up with mutually exclusive philosophies of life. Creation is bound by that philosophy of life which says that rationality must be absolute or we could have no intelligent experience about anything. Evolution is bound up with that philosophy of life which says that experience can float in the void.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ Cornelius Van Til, “John Goes to College – Part Two,” in *The Works of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. Eric Sigward; CD-ROM; New York: Labels Army Co., 1997); originally published in *The Presbyterian Guardian* (1940), vol. 8.

Van Til is viewing the hallucination argument against the resurrection in the same way, as a challenge from a philosophy of life that excludes Christianity, rather than as a mere factual claim that can be considered within the Christian-theistic worldview, even though there are factual claims related to it.

Even if, for the sake of the argument, we say that here Van Til is contradicting his other statements that empirical evidence is necessary to prove that Christ rose from the dead, and thereby denying that the resurrection can be deduced from the absolute nature of God, then this statement does not epitomize Van Til's thought on the matter, but is the exception to what I have shown to be a fairly well-thought-out program of apologetics that requires empirical investigation into Christ's resurrection.

Van Til's following statement may make it seem as if Van Til requires one, absolutely certain argument to prove everything about the Bible and Christianity: "[T]he Reformed apologist maintains that there is an absolutely valid argument for the existence of God and for the truth of Christian theism. He cannot do less without virtually admitting that God's revelation to man is not clear."¹⁷⁷ This statement by Van Til may seem to contradict the role of empirical evidence in confirming the biblical canon. If this is not what he means, he might still be criticized for not making the appropriate qualifications. But it is unfair to require an author to always qualify every statement immediately with every possible qualification. Van Til makes those qualifications elsewhere. Furthermore, we can see in the immediate context that "admitting that God's revelation to man is not clear" means for the Christian apologist to allow that the unbeliever has some rational justification for pretending that there is no God whose word must be obeyed. In the next paragraph, which concludes the section in the chapter, Van Til writes: "[I]t is only the atomic energy of a truly Reformed methodology that will explode the last *Festung* to which the Roman Catholic and the Arminian always permit him to retreat and to dwell in safety."¹⁷⁸ The Scripturally-authorized empirical tests, which require the sovereign Creator of heaven and earth be presupposed, do not give the unbeliever a rationally defensible escape route to hide from his obligation to obey God and His revelation.

¹⁷⁷ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), p. 121.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

Bahnsen's Mischaracterization

Although the evidence for Van Til's endorsement of empirical evidence in defense of the faith is fairly strong, Frame is not the only Vantillian to fail to give it the place that it deserves in Van Til's thought. There is no more formidable defender of Van Til than Greg Bahnsen. Bahnsen wrote an essay called "The Impropriety of Evidentially Arguing for the Resurrection."¹⁷⁹ The title is often taken to mean that it is always improper to argue for the resurrection by appealing to empirical evidence. However, Bahnsen's argument in the essay is mainly that empirical evidence is not religiously neutral and should not be presented as such by the Christian apologist, which is a position that is completely consistent with what I have argued in this essay. Bahnsen says that "there are many reasons why the evidentialist's building a case for Christianity upon neutral ground with the unbeliever ought to be avoided."¹⁸⁰ The key word here is "neutral." There can be no religiously neutral ground when there is a God who claims all ground as His. Yet, there is no way that those who walked with Jesus would have known that He was the Messiah of God simply by presupposing it. Others could, and did, claim to be Messiahs. Christ offered empirical evidence for His messianic claims – the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, the miracles that He performed, and His own predictions that came true.¹⁸¹ A Vantillian who rejects such empirical proofs of Christ's messianic claims is an obscurantist and unfaithful to Scripture.

Unfortunately Bahnsen has led many Vantillians in that direction to a degree. The only legitimate use of empirical evidence that Bahnsen offers in his essay is that "we may

¹⁷⁹ Greg Bahnsen, "The Impropriety of Evidentially Arguing for the Resurrection," *Synapse II* (Westminster Seminary, January, 1972), <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/PA003.htm> (accessed 11 September 2010).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Christ's resurrection may have been his most important prediction to come true, but the most publically verifiable one was His prediction that Jerusalem and the temple would be destroyed within one generation – about 40 years later (Matt 23:36; Matt 24:1-3, 34). In fact the Roman army did just that in A.D. 70. See James B. Jordan, *The Handwriting on the Wall: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Powder Springs, Ga.: American Vision, 2007), 341-42; and N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), ch. 8.

momentarily silence the belligerent claim of the skeptic by showing that even on his tacit assumptions the resurrection is not a sheer impossibility (as evidence would indicate).”¹⁸² He fails to indicate any positive use of evidence on the basis of Christian theistic assumptions. Bahnsen cites Jesus’ exposition of what “all the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25) to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus as an example of apologetics relying on the word of God “rather than offering them compelling evidence of the resurrection.”¹⁸³ But the conversation began with the disciples saying that they were bewildered at finding Jesus’ tomb empty (Luke 24:22-24), therefore a better explanation of this scene than pitting Scripture against empirical evidence is that Jesus was showing them the correct interpretation of the empirical evidence that they had already seen.

In his posthumous magnum opus on Van Til, Bahnsen defends the legitimacy of using historical evidence in apologetics¹⁸⁴ and even quotes Van Til’s statement that “Historical apologetics is absolutely necessary and indispensable to point out that Christ arose from the grave, etc.”¹⁸⁵ But Bahnsen’s one attempt to explain how the use of empirical evidence integrates with Van Til’s transcendental argument is this analogy: The presentation of empirical evidence to defend Christianity is like watching the video-tape replay of a dramatic sports event, with the presuppositional argument being analogous to seeing the event when it actually happened:

Somebody might wonder, “But if the presuppositions already require that the Bible be true and thus that Christ rose from the dead, how could the evidence be impressive?” Well, after the game-winning shot at the buzzer has become a matter of history, and even though we know the outcome of the game, we are still astounded by that shot and can watch it in awe when we observe the video-tape replay of the game. The shot is still impressive, even when we know the context and outcome. And the resurrection of our

¹⁸² Greg Bahnsen, “The Impropriety of Evidentially Arguing for the Resurrection.”

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Greg Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1998), 634-48.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 636, quoting Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 146.

Lord is far more impressive, even when we approach it within the context of the Bible's presupposed truth.¹⁸⁶

This hardly gives empirical evidence the “absolutely necessary and indispensable” role that Van Til gives it. Proving the resurrection of Christ by empirical evidence is not merely creating a less vivid imitation of the “real” argument – the transcendental argument. The two arguments have two distinct and essential functions. TAG mainly concerns proving the existence of the concrete universal God, and the empirical arguments mainly concern proof that the presupposed God has intervened extraordinarily at particular points in history.

The two most well-known expositors of Van Til have adopted an unfortunate version of the form/matter scheme in their apologetic methodology. Frame has rejected the One in favor of the Many in arguing for the existence of God. He rejects a single, certain, atomic-powered argument for the existence of God in favor of a multitude of probabilistic arguments with a transcendental goal that's never completely achieved of showing the impossibility of the contrary. Bahnsen rejects any empirical, probabilistic arguments in defense of Christianity, even if the issue is not the existence of God, except as those arguments are seen as pale reflections of the one transcendental argument, like the shadows on the wall of Plato's cave produced by the light of the Good outside the cave. Van Til's actual apologetic program allows for both the One and the Many in integration with each other in the apologetic task of proving the whole of Christian theism, with the one transcendental argument proving the existence of God, and a multitude of empirical arguments proving whether this transcendently-necessary God has spoken through a person at a particular point in history.

Boa and Bowman applaud Frame's “integrative approach” of using both TAG and empirical evidence in the defense of Christianity.¹⁸⁷ The most reasonable interpretation of Van Til is that his apologetic program does not need to be integrated with evidential apologetics because Van Til himself allowed an essential role for evidential apologetics, when done the right way. But since as Christians we don't worship any mere man, a

¹⁸⁶ Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic*, 645 n. 200.

¹⁸⁷ Boa and Bowman, *Faith Has Its Reasons*, 476.

more important question is what relationship TAG should have to evidential apologetics, regardless of what Van Til taught. Even if I have misinterpreted Van Til's meaning to "Christian theism as a unit" and Frame is right about how Van Til used the phrase, isn't the relationship between TAG and empirical evidence that I have defended the most reasonable one to adopt?

Intersystemic and Intrasystemic Responses to False Faiths

Many people ask how Van Til's approach to apologetics can deal with another religion like Islam. The concern is that Islam seems to teach an absolute God, so if Van Til's argument only deals with those who reject an absolute God, how would he be able to reject Islam? What I have argued above about the scope and limits of TAG provides the tools to answer this question.

One approach is to show how Islam's Allah is not really absolute. In a rare mention of Islam, Van Til says that the "ethical religions" like "Mohammedanism" do not truly teach an absolute God: "Yet in no case is the moral law conceived as proceeding with inviolable authority from an absolute God."¹⁸⁸ The "ethical religions" do not require man to "look nowhere else for his joy and peace" than to God, "who can in no sense tolerate sin."¹⁸⁹ Van Til seems to be saying that these religions view salvation as a product of man's efforts, which will always be sinful to some extent, rather than as a product of God's sovereign grace based on a perfect payment for sin, and that toleration of sin (eternally allowing sin to go unpunished) implies that God is not the absolute standard of holiness.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Cornelius Van Til, "The Ten Commandments," in *The Works of Cornelius Van Til*.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Also see, Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955), 81-83. Bahnsen makes this same ethical argument against God's absoluteness under Islam: "Then again, the Islamic worldview teaches that God is holy and just toward sin, but (unlike the theology of the Bible -- see here the words of Moses, David, and Jesus) there can indeed be 'salvation' *where guilt remains unremitted* by the shedding of blood of a substitute for the sinner. The legalism of Islam (good works weighed against bad) does not address this problem because a person's previous bad works are not changed by later good ones, but continue on one's record in the very sight of Allah (who supposedly cannot tolerate sin but must punish it)." Bahnsen also makes a second presuppositional argument Islam's view of God, this time from an epistemological angle: "Sophisticated

But even if there is no transcendental challenge to be made against Islam, it can be judged like a claim to revelation within the Christian worldview – by consistency with previous revelation and empirical evidence of miracles, fulfilled prophecies, etc. We might say that both of these approaches are “presuppositional,” but we need to distinguish between two senses of “presuppositional”: 1) An intersystemic critique in which the presuppositions of the opposing belief system are different from Christian theism, which involves showing how their presuppositions reduce to absurdity by undermining the possibility of rationality; and 2) an intrasystemic critique in which the other belief system presents itself as a new revelation adding itself to the Biblical canon, in which case the presupposition of the absoluteness of God and other doctrines entailed by it are assumed to be true, at least for the sake of the argument.¹⁹¹ With Islam and other religions that claim a biblical origin, both types of critiques are legitimate options.

“Frastianity” is a hypothetical challenge to Van Til’s claim about the transcendental argument proving the “impossibility of the contrary.”¹⁹² It originated in a Van Til discussion list in 1998 in a post by David Byron. He said,

theologies offered by Muslim scholars interpret the theology of the *Koran* (cf. 42:11) as teaching the transcendence (*tanzih*) of unchanging Allah in such an extreme fashion that no human language (derived from changing experience) can positively and appropriately describe Allah -- in which case the *Koran* rules out what the *Koran* claims to be.” Greg Bahnsen, “Presuppositional Reasoning with False Faiths” *Penpoint* VII:2 (Feb./Mar., 1996), <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pa208.htm>, (accessed 11 September 2010). In *Christ and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1968), Van Til argues that Judaism undermines the absoluteness of God by making God’s law an empty form to be filled by the evolving wisdom of autonomous man.

¹⁹¹ Greg Bahnsen made such a distinction when he said, “if they can answer the problem about rationalism at all, they are doing so because they are relying on the Bible; and that may be true about Islam, Judaism, and some forms of the cults. But to the degree they do that, what are they doing? They are *heretically* following the Bible; that is, they are picking and choosing, distorting and all that. And consequently the way you reason with them is on the premise of the Bible.” “Dialectic Tensions” in *The Philosophy of Christianity* (audio), GB222, at <http://www.cmfnow.com/philosophyofchristianity-dialectictensions-2of23.aspx>.

¹⁹² Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 205, 206, 223.

The question, then, is what to make of the Fristian Theist, who appeals to authoritative revelation (in which the apparent inconsistencies are masked by an appeal to mystery) to provide a philosophical account that is similar to Christian Theism in many respects, but different in some key ones--say, it propounds a dual godhead rather than a triune one, and allows for human sacrifice and has no sabbath. Simply asking where such a religion comes from is inadequate, since the person propounding it can always claim to be its prophetic conduit from the transcendent realm.¹⁹³

By design, the Fristian religion shares all of the doctrines of Christianity that can be proven by Van Til's transcendental argument, so the intersystemic critique would be of no use to distinguish the two. The question this raises is how can Van Til claim to prove the "impossibility of the contrary"¹⁹⁴ to Christianity by TAG if the argument can't exclude a heterodox religion like Fristianity? Again, the approach to Van Til's apologetic that I have defended in this essay provides the tools to answer this question.

The last sentence in David Byron's quote above is false according to what we have already seen from the tests that Van Til gives for canonicity. Just because someone claims to be a "prophetic conduit from the transcendent realm" does not exclude the alleged revelation from the intrasystemic tests that include empirical tests about "where such a religion comes from." Like Fristianity, or more so, the false prophecy by Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 has all the trappings of a true prophecy: He delivers it from God's temple and neither God's sovereignty nor anything entailed by it are denied in the false prophecy. God's prophet Jeremiah is even willing to consider Hananiah's words to be from the Lord: "Amen! May the LORD do so! May the LORD fulfill the words you have prophesied by bringing the articles of the LORD's house and all the exiles back to this place from Babylon" (Jer 28:6). But Jeremiah also warns about the possibility that historical events could prove the prophecy to be false: "But the prophet who prophesies

¹⁹³ David Byron, <http://www.baroquepotion.com/vantil/archive-Feb-1998/msg00042.html>, (Feb. 15, 1998) (accessed 11 September 2010). For an overview of some posts related to the issue, see David Byron, <http://www.baroquepotion.com/vantil/archive-Aug-2001/msg00015.html> (Aug. 8, 2001) (accessed 11 September 2010).

¹⁹⁴ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 205.

peace will be recognized as one truly sent by the LORD only if his prediction comes true” (Jer 28:9). God was so angered by the false prophecy that he didn’t leave the people of God waiting for two years to see if the Babylonians would bring the temple articles and the exiles back to Israel. God vigorously defended the integrity of His word by giving Jeremiah a predictive prophecy for Hananiah that was fulfilled within two months: “This is what the LORD says: 'I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the LORD.' In the seventh month of that same year, Hananiah the prophet died” (Jer 28:16-17).

Since there can be only one absolute, both Christianity and Frisianity could not both be true. As Van Til says in terms of Christianity versus Islam, “The very contention of Christian theism is, as we have seen, that every historical ‘fact’ must be interpreted in the light of the existence of an absolute God. It follows logically that only one historical religion can be the true religion.”¹⁹⁵ The false religion would have to invent historical events to include in its false Bible, the falsity of which would be exposed through empirical investigation. Like with the false prophet Hananiah, God would vigorously defend his true revelation by leading His sheep to discover the relevant empirical evidence so that His sheep would hear His voice and not the voice of a thief (John 10:4-5).

Furthermore, Frisianity would share the Christian view about the depravity of man, and that has an important implication about where the Frisian revelation could come from. Van Til says,

Nowhere else in human literature, we believe, is the concept of an absolute God presented. And this fact is once more intimately related to the fact that nowhere else is there a conception of sin, such as that presented in the Bible. According to the Bible, sin has set man at enmity against God. Consequently it has been man’s endeavor to get away from the idea of God, that is, a truly absolute God.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 127.

¹⁹⁶ Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, 11. Also see Van Til, *Psychology of Religion*, 61.

Man's hatred of an absolute God means that man would not invent a religion like Frisianity in historic independence of the true revelation. Frisianity would have to be a fraudulent imitation of Christianity that someone copied from the Bible. It would be like other religions that claim to have their origin in Biblical revelation, like Islam, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses, except that Frisianity tries to completely hide its dependence on the Bible. But as with Hananiah, God would not let the evidence remain hidden.

An interesting issue that David Byron raises with a two-person Godhead for Frisianity is whether Van Til's TAG proves a three-person Godhead. Although Van Til often talks about the transcendental necessity of the "ontological trinity," we've seen that his argument is that the one and the many must be equally ultimate in God; and a specific number of manyness does not add anything to the argument.

So what does this mean for the "impossibility of the contrary" claim? It means that all the possibilities are covered for those doctrines that are necessary to account for rationality, which I understand to be the issue of whether the one and the many are eternally related, or its negation, which is that the one and the many are originally in abstraction from each other.¹⁹⁷ If the negation is false, the positive proposition must be true, and there are no other possible options *for that issue*. For that issue, the scope of the argument is universal, even though it does not settle all details of all possible worldviews. As Eckart Förster explains:

A transcendental argument . . . in order to establish a particular condition of knowledge or experience, proceeds by considering an alternative, that is, the *negation* of the condition and, subsequently, demonstrates its internal incoherence. Clearly, this exhausts the field of possible *alternatives to this condition*. For although one may, perhaps, imagine different philosophical

¹⁹⁷ See Michel H. Warren, Jr., "Christian Civilization is the Only Civilization, In a Sense, of Course," <http://www.christianciv.com/ChristCivEssay.htm> (accessed 11 September 2010).

positions or conceptions based on the negation of the original condition, this would not add to the number of alternatives to *it*.¹⁹⁸

The impossibility of the contrary does not apply to every doctrine of Christian orthodoxy, since not every one of them can be deduced from the transcendently necessary proposition.

Since the “impossibility of the contrary” does not exclude a heterodox religion like Fristianity, should Van Til claim that he proves “Christian theism” by demonstrating the “impossibility of the contrary?” I have shown how Van Til uses the phrase “Christian theism” to refer to the limited doctrines of an absolute God and an absolute Scripture. Maybe someone can come up with a different phrase that explains more precisely what is proven by TAG. But regardless of the name, even with its limits, TAG serves as an essential, “atomic-powered” weapon, though not the only weapon, in the arsenal of the Christian apologist.

In summary, Van Til’s arguments against attempting to prove “that” God exists without proving “what” kind of God exists and his demand that apologists defend “Christian theism as a unit” are not demands that all the doctrines of Christian theism be proven by a single argument. They relate to the transcendental argument that the one and the many are equally ultimate in God, rather than God being an empty abstraction and facts being isolated particulars. Any fact in nature reveals a concrete universal God in terms of the argument that the intelligibility of any fact that a person may encounter in the world depends on the existence of such a God. Thus TAG is a form of natural revelation.

But as Protestants have traditionally held, the Bible reveals much more about God than is revealed through nature, especially concerning the means of redemption. Therefore all the doctrines of Christian orthodoxy cannot be deduced from the attributes of God proved by the transcendental argument. To determine whether any particular event in history is a special communication from God, TAG is insufficient, and empirical,

¹⁹⁸ Eckart Förster, “How are Transcendental Arguments Possible?”, quoted in Michael R. Butler, “The Transcendental Argument for God’s Existence,” *The Standard Bearer: A Festschrift for Greg L. Bahnsen* (Steven M. Schlissel, ed., Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 2002), 114.

probabilistic arguments become necessary. Also, after the Fall, man will not acknowledge God's revelation through nature without being confronted by the special, redemptive revelation of the Bible. This makes TAG dependent on the Bible in a sense.

On the other hand, the empirical arguments in defense of the Bible depend on TAG. Empirical arguments require the apologist to presuppose the existence of the God proven by TAG, because TAG is a philosophy of fact that proves that no facts can be intelligible unless this type of God exists. The type of God proved by TAG is a God with absolute authority. As the Ultimate One and Many who determines the relationships between all created universals and particulars, God's revelation, whether through nature or Scripture, is absolutely authoritative regarding the interpretation of all facts. The Bible's absolute authority is derived from God's absolute authority, thus the argument for the nature of the Bible's authority is TAG, even though TAG is not sufficient to prove all of the Bible's content. Van Til's demand for certainty regarding God's existence has implications for the defense of the Bible, yet he allows probabilistic, empirical arguments in defense of the Bible in other respects. These two strategies are not in conflict, but constitute an apologetic program of multiple types of arguments that operate in mutual dependence and support.