

## Van Til's Presuppositionalism

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

*1995 celebrates the centennial of the birth of Cornelius Van Til, the most profound writer in apologetics in the twentieth century. His distinctive method was called the "presuppositional" defense of the faith, which is explained in this excerpt from Dr. Bahnsen's upcoming book on Van Til's apologetic, including readings and analysis.*

In the words of 1 Peter 3:15, the personal prerequisite for offering a reasoned defense of the Christian faith is this: "set apart Christ as Lord in your hearts." Christ must be the ultimate authority over our philosophy, our reasoning, and our argumentation -- not just at the end, but at the beginning, of the apologetical endeavor.

If we are to "cast down reasonings and every high thing exalted against the knowledge of God," said Paul, then we must "bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5.) An ultimate commitment to Christ covers the entire range of human activity, including every aspect of intellectual endeavor. To reason in a way which does not recognize this is to transgress the first and great commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with... all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). In light of this, our thoughts about apologetic method should be controlled by the word of Jesus Christ, not merely our apologetic conclusions.

Very simply, if the apologist is to rid himself of profane audacity, his faith in the greatness of divine wisdom must be championed by means of a procedure which itself honors the same wisdom. After all, in Christ "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are deposited" (Colossians 2:3), no exception being made for the knowledge by which the Christian defends the knowledge of Christ. This means the apologist must presuppose the truth of God's word from start to finish in his apologetic witness. A "presupposition" is an elementary assumption in one's reasoning or in the process by which opinions are formed. As used here, a "presupposition" refers not to just any assumption in an argument, but to a personal commitment which is at the most basic level of one's network of beliefs. Presuppositions form a wide-ranging, foundational perspective (or starting point) in terms of which everything else is interpreted and evaluated. As such, presuppositions have the greatest authority in one's thinking, being treated as your least negotiable belief and being granted the highest immunity to revision.

It is only to be expected that, in matters of ultimate commitment, the intended conclusion of one's line of argumentation will also be the presuppositional standard which governs his manner of

argumentation for that conclusion -- or else the intended conclusion is not his ultimate commitment after all. Thus unbelievers refuse to submit to the authority of God in their thinking, insisting that they themselves are intellectually autonomous. The situation is pictured well by C. S. Lewis: "The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock.... The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that Man is on the Bench and God in the Dock" (God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics, ed. Walter Hooper [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970], p. 244).

It has been the genius of Cornelius Van Til's approach to defending the Christian faith to see how entirely inappropriate this intellectual attitude is. The spirit of saint Paul arouses him: "rather, who are you, O man, to reply against God?" (Romans 9:20), and "Let God be deemed true, though every man is a liar" (Romans 3:4). Created men, especially as sinful rebels, are in no moral or intellectual position to challenge their sovereign Creator and Lord.

A thoughtless approach to Christian epistemology which forgets this runs the danger of transgressing God's clear prohibition, "You shall not put the Lord your God to test" (Deuteronomy 6:16). Notice how Jesus himself, in an apologetical and moral contest with Satan, rested his case on a simple quotation of this stricture from the word of God (Matthew 4:7). Remember the example of Job, who dared to question God and demand answers from Him. "The Lord said to Job: will the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? Let him who argues with God answer Him!... Would you condemn Me to justify yourself?" (Job 40:1, 8). God is not in the dock; we are. His word and character are not questionable; ours are. And as Van Til is acutely aware, this is not true simply in some narrow "religious" or moral sense; it equally applies to man's intellectual reasoning (which is an expression of a man's religious posture).

Our Christian epistemology (or theory of knowledge) should thus be elaborated and worked out in a way which is consistent with its own fundamental principles (or presuppositions), lest it be incoherent and ineffective. We ought not to espouse one thing theologically, then practice something else in our scholarship. One way to say this is to say that Christian scholars and apologists must be thoroughly "self-conscious" about the character of their own epistemological position, letting its standards regiment and regulate every detail of their system of beliefs and its application. They need always to form opinions and develop reasoning in light of their fundamental Christian commitments. It has been Van Til's aim to bring this ideal of "epistemological self-consciousness" to bear upon the theory and practice of defending the Christian faith.