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FIDEISM AND PRESUPPOSITIONALISM

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The oft-asserted view that a presuppositional apologetic is inherently fideistic raises the question of whether Cornelius Van Til was, indeed, a fideist. When Van Til's writings are examined in light of fideism defined as an advocacy of faith as the sole source of reliance in the ascertaining of truth, fideism is seen as incompatible with Van Til's position. His presuppositional approach manifests a concern for truth, for rationality, and for a faith that has both content and foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

CERTAINLY one of the most frequent characterizations of the presuppositional apologetic of Cornelius Van Til is that it is "fideistic." Lewis, for example, is concerned that Van Til, despite serving forty-five years as a professor of apologetics, has constructed a system of theology, not a system of apologetics.¹ In Lewis's estimation, Van Til has not supplied a means of disputing with unbelievers concerning the truthfulness of Christianity. "In the name of defending the faith he has left the faith defenseless."²

Montgomery likewise warns against Van Til's tendency to treat the unbeliever as a believer, working out systematic theology and its implications rather than verifying Christianity by "focusing upon their needs" and using as a "starting point" the "common rationality."³ Montgomery fears that Van Til has given the unbeliever "the impression that our gospel is as aprioristically, fideistically irrational as the presuppositional claims of its competitors."⁴

¹G. R. Lewis, "Van Til and Carnell-Part I," in *Jerusalem and Athens* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 349.

²*Ibid.*, 361; see also his review of W. White, Jr., *Van Til: Defender of the Faith* (*Eternity* [1979] 44).

³J. W. Montgomery, "Once Upon An *A Priori*," in *Jerusalem and Athens* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 391.

⁴*Ibid.*

Pinnock also raises the same issue. While saluting the contribution that Van Til has made to "a virile twentieth century apologetic," Pinnock contends that "a curious epistemology derived from a modern Calvinistic school of philosophy in Holland has led him to align his orthodox theology with a form of irrational fideism."⁵

Geisler, in his *Christian Apologetics*, includes Van Til in his chapter on fideism along with Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Barth. Geisler states that Van Til "speaks from a strong Reformed Biblical perspective theologically and yet in an absolute revelational presuppositionalism apologetically."⁶ "Methodological fideism" is Geisler's term for this position.⁷ Geisler notes five "central contentions" that are characteristic of fideism (including, apparently, that of Van Til): (1) faith alone is the way to God; (2) truth is not found in the purely rational or objective realm, if it is there at all; (3) evidence and reason do not point definitively in the direction of God; (4) the tests of truth are existential, not rational; and (5) not only God's revelation but his grace is the source of all truth.⁸

Hanna has contended that "presuppositionism" (as he terms it) is able, in response to inquiries as to the warrant for belief, to answer only "in terms of obscurantistic fideism."⁹ Hanna regularly uses presuppositionism and fideism interchangeably in his book.

More recently, Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley have argued that—protestations to the contrary notwithstanding—Van Til's apologetic has no place (or at least no warranted place) for reasoning with or giving evidence to unbelievers.¹⁰ In their judgment, fideism is the inevitable result of Van Til's presuppositionalism.

Are these critics correct? Is Van Til's presuppositionalism fideistic? This study considers the meaning of fideism, examines its appropriateness as a label for Van Til's position, and concludes with a more extended analysis of the term "presuppositional."

FIDEISM

The diversity in the definitions of fideism is striking. Anything approaching unanimity is lamentably absent. It is not that the definitions are antithetical, but rather that their nuances vary significantly. Obviously, the term derives from the Latin word for faith (*fides*), but

⁵C. H. Pinnock, "A Philosophy of Christian Evidences," *Jerusalem and Athens* (ed. E. R. Gechan; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 425.

⁶N. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 56.

⁷*Ibid.*, 57.

⁸*Ibid.*, 58–59.

⁹M. M. Hanna, *Crucial Questions in Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 96.

¹⁰R. C. Sproul, J. Gerstner, A. Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 304–9.

having agreed upon that, one must decide upon the precise significance of the term. Fideism focuses on faith, but how is faith defined? How is it related to reason, knowledge, proof, and evidence? How is it related to truth? These questions are not usually given the same answers.

Perhaps a composite definition of fideism can be constructed. The modifiers that are most often associated with the term, either implicitly or explicitly, include "irrational," "blind," "subjectivistic," or "leap." There is also the frequent implication that faith is its own warrant, its own criterion, in the adjudication of truth-claims. Fideism would therefore advocate faith as the sole or perhaps final source of reliance in the ascertaining of truth. This statement may be limited to religious or theological matters or it may be extended to all epistemological questions. The definition would include the denigration of reason as useful in the specified realm. Additionally, fideism seems to call into question (or perhaps, more passively, to ignore) the grounds for faith, thus becoming "a blind leap in the dark," characterized by a focus upon the agent's *activity* of believing rather than upon the *object* of one's belief (subjectivism rather than objectivism). Thus faith, that is, the act of believing, is its own standard, its own warrant. One decides by deciding. Faith is a kind of "will to believe."

If this is an accurate description of fideism, then it would appear to be unacceptable for Christians because it is incompatible with Scripture. Christ urges the Jews to believe him because of his works (John 5:36; 10:37, 38). In fact, in John 5, Christ puts forth several bases or reasons for believing in him: his words, his works, John the Baptist's witness, and the witness of God and Scripture.

Moreover, faith is repeatedly represented in Scripture as trust or reliance upon that which is trustworthy; assent to that which is worthy. Faith thus has an object and a basis. It is intimately related to truth and not merely to the individual's strength of will. Faith is a relationship to that which is; it does not create its object. In short, faith is trust in (involving assent to) someone or something that is worthy of trust. And faith does not seem itself to be the criterion of the "worthiness" of the object; rather it is a response to that which already meets a criterion of "worthiness," whatever that may be. Moreover, the opposition (and perhaps even the distinction) between faith and reason (or believing and knowing), which is implicit in fideism, is foreign to Scripture.

As defined above, fideism falls short of the biblical pattern of faith. It is also incompatible with Van Til's position. As early as 1932, in what is in many respects an expansion of his 1925 Th.M. thesis by the same title, Van Til attempted to "remove the common misunderstanding that Christianity is opposed to factual investigation." "The

greater the amount of detailed study and the more carefully such study is undertaken, the more truly Christian will the method be"¹¹ (referring to what he terms "the inductive aspect of the method of implication"). To hold to the doctrine of the authority of Scripture when the believer "knows that it can be empirically shown to be contrary to the facts of Scripture themselves" is "obscurantistic," according to Van Til. "It goes without saying that such should not be his attitude."¹²

In his syllabus on *Christian—Theistic Evidences*, Van Til notes, "it is quite commonly held that we [apparently, Van Til is referring to "modern educated men"] cannot accept anything that is not consonant with the result of a sound scientific methodology. With this we can as Christians heartily agree."¹³ Later in that work he notes that "the Christian position is certainly not opposed to experimentation and observation."¹⁴

On pp. 34–35 of this work, he explicitly discusses fideism, dividing its advocates into two classes: "the consistent fideists hold that no defense of any sort is possible. The inconsistent fideists contend that Christianity may be scientifically, but cannot be philosophically, defended."¹⁵ He describes the former group:

They saw no way of harmonizing the facts of the Christian religion with the "constitution and course of nature." They gave up the idea of a philosophical apologetics entirely. This fideistic attitude comes to expression frequently in the statement of the experiential proof of the truth of Christianity. People will say that they know that they are saved and that Christianity is true no matter what the philosophical or scientific evidence for or against it may be. And this is done not only by those who have had no opportunity to investigate the evidence for Christianity, but also by those who have. But, in thus seeking to withdraw from all intellectual argument, such fideists have virtually admitted the validity of the argument against Christianity. They will have to believe in their hearts what they have virtually allowed to be intellectually indefensible.¹⁶

Thus Van Til conceives of commitment to Christ and Christianity as involving investigation. What Christianity asserts must indeed be the

¹¹C. Van Til, *Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969; retitled reprint of Van Til's 1932 work, *The Metaphysics of Apologetics*) 7.

¹²C. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 35.

¹³C. Van Til, *Christian-Theistic Evidences* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) x.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

real state of affairs or else the commitment is erroneous. Faith must have truth as its object. Christians ought not to believe (or, "believe in") that which is false. Van Til states:

Christianity meets every legitimate demand of reason. Surely Christianity is not irrational. To be sure, it must be accepted on faith, but surely it must not be taken on blind faith. Christianity is capable of rational defense.¹⁷

When we say that God is a mystery for us we do not mean that our knowledge of him is not true as far as it goes. When we say that God is "absolutely Other" we do not mean that there is not a rational relation between God and us. As God created us in accordance with his plan, that is, as God created us in accordance with his absolute rationality, so there must be a rational relationship from us to God. Christianity is, in the last analysis not an absolute irrationalism, but an absolute "rationalism." In fact we may contrast every non-Christian epistemology with Christian epistemology by saying that Christian epistemology believes in an ultimate rationalism while all other systems of epistemology believe in an ultimate irrationalism.¹⁸

Van Til, at least if we give credence to his own statement, is not a fideist.¹⁹ Perhaps, however, he is inconsistent with his stated principles. Perhaps he fails to realize his goal. Does Van Til in the elaboration of his presuppositional apologetic violate his ostensive commitments?

PRESUPPOSITIONALISM AND PROOF

In one of several passages in which Van Til explains what he means by the term presuppositionalism,²⁰ he states, "To argue by presupposition is to indicate what are the epistemological and metaphysical principles that underlie and control one's method."²¹ He explains:

The method of reasoning by presupposition may be said to be indirect rather than direct. The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian Theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both

¹⁷C. Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972) 184.

¹⁸C. Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (3rd ed., Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967) 41.

¹⁹See also G. L. Bahnsen, "Inductivism, Inerrancy, and Presuppositionalism," *JETS* 20 (1977) 292-95; and T. Notaro, *Van Til and the Use of Evidence* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig, 1980).

²⁰Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 99-105.

²¹*Ibid.*, 99.

parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the "facts" and "laws" intelligible. The question is as to what the "facts" and "laws" really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes that they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?

The answer to this question cannot be finally settled by any direct discussion of "facts." It must, in the last analysis, be settled indirectly. The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his [the opponent's] method merely for argument's sake, in order to show him that on such a position the "facts" are not facts and the "laws" are not laws. He must also ask the non-Christian to place himself upon the Christian position for argument's sake in order that he may be shown that only upon such a basis do "facts" and "laws" appear intelligible.²²

Later Van Til clarifies this position when he writes,

every bit of historical investigation, whether it be in the directly Biblical field, archaeology or in general history, is bound to confirm the truth of the claims of the Christian position. But I would not talk endlessly about facts and more facts without ever challenging the non-believer's philosophy of fact.²³

Van Til is concerned, therefore, to deal with the foundations of a philosophy of life or a world-view, on the conviction that the meaning of particular terms and aspects of life is determined by those foundations. However, he does not seem to argue for a more or less arbitrary postulation of the Christian foundation as merely one of several alternatives, each of which is viable. Rather, he is arguing that though there are a number of ostensible alternatives, only one is in fact viable: "It will then appear that Christian theism . . . is the only position which gives human reason a field for successful operation and a method of true progress in knowledge."²⁴

This is so, in Van Til's judgment, because the only alternative to Christian theism is a position ultimately based upon chance. Speaking of the "natural man" or unregenerate, Van Til points out,

On his assumption his own rationality is a product of chance. On his assumption even the laws of logic which he employs are products of chance. The rationality and purpose that he may be searching for are still bound to be products of chance. So then the Christian apologist, whose position requires him to hold that Christian theism is really true and as such must be taken as the presupposition which alone makes the acquisition of knowledge in any field intelligible, must join his "friend"

²²Ibid., 100-101.

²³Ibid., 199.

²⁴Ibid., 102.

in his hopeless gyrations so as to point out to him that his efforts are always in vain.²⁵

What are the implications of this for apologetic disputation? Since the discussion, according to Van Til, concerns the foundations of one's position, can we do anything besides merely assert our message? The answer to this question has been indicated in the quotation from Van Til. The Christian position must be demonstrated to be the only viable foundation for life in all of its complexity. For Van Til, presuppositions are proven (albeit indirectly), not merely "picked":

the best and only possible proof for the existence of such a God is that his existence is required for the uniformity of nature and for the coherence of all things in the world. We cannot *prove* the existence of beams underneath a floor if by proof we mean that they must be ascertainable in the way that we can see the chairs and tables of the room. But the very idea of a floor as the support of tables and chairs requires the idea of beams that are underneath. Thus there is absolutely certain proof for the existence of God and the truth of Christian theism.²⁶

Van Til contends that the argument by presupposition is "objectively valid" even if it is "subjectively unacceptable" to the unregenerate.²⁷ The denial of Christianity's truth does nothing to detract from its actual veracity:

the 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. It is fatal for the Reformed apologist to admit that man has done justice to the objective evidence if he comes to any other conclusion than that of the truth of Christian theism.²⁸

Like the Reformed preacher proclaiming the Gospel to an unresponsive unregenerate, "he does not say that his message is less certainly true because of its non-acceptance by the natural man."²⁹

Thus, contrary to the prevailing consensus by both critic and disciple, Van Til does have a place for proofs in his apologetics. Frame has collected a rather formidable list of passages in which Van Til articulates his position regarding proofs.³⁰

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 103.

²⁷Ibid., 104.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰J. M. Frame, "The Problem of Theological Paradox," in *The Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (ed. G. North; Vallecito, CA: Ross, 1976) 301.

To say that the argument for Christianity and for the existence of God is absolutely valid, I am merely applying the idea that God's revelation without and within man is perspicuous. If then man rightly interprets this revelation he has an absolutely valid argument for the truth.³¹

There is objective evidence in abundance and it is sufficiently clear. Men *ought*, if only they reasoned rightly, to come to the conclusion that God exists. That is to say, if the theistic proof is constructed as it ought to be constructed, it is objectively valid, whatever the attitude of those to whom it comes may be.³²

If theistically stated, the arguments do nothing but give the content of the revelation of God to man and argue that it is the only reasonable thing to do for a human being to accept this revelation.³³

He goes on to explain what he means by "correct construction" of the theistic proof:

To be constructed rightly, theistic proof ought to presuppose the ontological trinity and contend that, unless we may make this presupposition, all human predication is meaningless. The words "cause," "purpose," and "being," used as universals in the phenomenal world, could not be so used with meaning unless we may presuppose the self-contained God. If the matter is put this way, one argument is as sound as the other. Nor is any one of the arguments then at any point vulnerable. And future research cannot change their validity.³⁴

In Van Til's judgment, the theistic proofs should be stated "in such a manner as to make God the presupposition of the possibility of predication in every sphere of life."³⁵

What is the relationship of Van Til's proof of the existence of God by presupposition to the classic theistic proofs? Van Til states:

the true theistic proofs undertake to show that the ideas of existence (ontological proof), of cause (cosmological proof), and purpose (teleological proof) are meaningless unless they presuppose the existence of God.³⁶

All of the theistic arguments should really be taken together and reduced to the one argument of the possibility of human predication. Intelligent predication about anything with respect to nature or with

³¹Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 180.

³²*Ibid.*, 49.

³³C. Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 199.

³⁴Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 49-50.

³⁵Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 198.

³⁶Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel*, 190.

respect to man were impossible unless God existed as the ultimate reference point of it all.³⁷

In answer to the question, then, it is clear that Van Til attempts to reconstruct the proofs in terms of distinctly Christian formulations of the concepts that are involved as well as to "deepen" them by seeking for the only ultimately viable foundation for all of life and reality.

PRESUPPOSITION AS THE "TRANSCENDENTAL ONTIC PRECONDITION"

Bahnsen writes that "when world-views collide, the Christian transcendental epistemology calls for us to ask what foundations knowledge must have in order for man intelligibly to understand the facts at all."³⁸ Elsewhere it has been observed that:

many followers of Van Til see his system as a kind of transcendental argument which contends that it is absolutely necessary to presuppose the divine revelation in the Bible before one can consistently think, communicate, do science, or make any sense out of life or his world.³⁹

Both quotations include a crucial element for interpreting Van Til's position. That element is the "transcendental" dimension to his thought. As White notes, Van Til found his term "presupposition" in Immanuel Kant.⁴⁰ In his first *Critique*, Kant "found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for faith,"⁴¹ at least in relationship to three topics: "God, freedom, and immortality."⁴² In his second *Critique*, Kant argues for the existence of God, not on the basis of speculative reason ("knowledge") but rather practical reason ("faith"). Kant attempts to establish that, because of the reality of freedom and moral activity (involving also immortality as the occasion for future judgment of one's morality), it must be concluded that God also exists as the undergirding of morality and immortality.

In his discussion Kant uses terms such as presupposition, supreme ground, postulate, supposition, and assumption.⁴³ His point seems to

³⁷Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 102.

³⁸G. Bahnsen, "Pragmatism, Prejudice, and Presuppositionalism," in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship* (ed., G. North; Vallecito, CA: Ross, 1976) 290.

³⁹N. L. Geisler and P. D. Feinberg, *An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 264.

⁴⁰W. White, Jr., *Van Til: Defender of the Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1979) 74-75.

⁴¹I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Unabridged edition, trans. N. K. Smith; New York: St. Martins, 1965) 29.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (trans. L. W. Beck; Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956) 128-36.

be that God is the "transcendental precondition" for freedom, morality, and immortality. That is, God is the essential or necessary foundation in reality which makes possible these aspects of our life and experience.⁴⁴

This is not to say that Van Til or his followers are Kantians or that they endorse Kant's moral argument for the existence of God. It is merely to clarify that, by the term "presupposition" (as it refers to God), Van Til seems to have in mind not merely an epistemological axiom (and surely not an arbitrary or voluntaristic epistemological axiom) but rather an ontological (his term is "metaphysical") referent (which is, of course, significant for both epistemology and axiology). He is referring to that which (more properly, "him who") is the sole sufficient support and explanation of all of life and reality. When we examine life in all of its complexity, only one explanation is sufficient—the Triune God of whom Scripture speaks, who created, sustains, and guides all that exists.

If such be the case, Van Til's presuppositionalism is scarcely fideistic. It must be admitted that Van Til's criticisms of traditional apologetics and the classic theistic proofs sometimes are less than full-orbed and judiciously balanced, which can easily lead (and has in fact led) to misinterpretation. Moreover, some of his followers exceed him in opacity and extremity of statement, further distorting the picture. Nevertheless, Van Til's presuppositionalism does not manifest the various characteristics of fideism noted earlier. Instead, he manifests concern for truth, for rationality, for faith that has both content and basis. Van Til's position may be considered by some to be erroneous, but it cannot rightly be considered fideistic.

AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE

One of the aspects of Van Til's presuppositional argument is the notion that only God is "sufficient" as a foundation for life and reality. In light of the continuing discussion on the meaning and specification of "adequacy" as it relates to evidence and proof, it would seem advisable to those working with Van Til's position to specify what constitutes "sufficiency" or "adequacy" as they use it. Van Til's substantiation of his claim regarding God as alone sufficient, arguing by means of the "impossibility of the contrary" (i.e., a chance universe) is essentially the theme of his *Survey of Christian Epistemology*. Perhaps the discussion could well start there.

⁴⁴See C. S. Evans, *Subjectivity and Religious Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 15-73, for a further discussion of this issue in Kant.

Followers of Van Til might also compare his "presupposition" with John Montgomery's "self-evident axioms,"⁴⁵ Hanna's "universal givens,"⁴⁶ Geisler's "undeniable truths,"⁴⁷ and Clark's "unprovable assumptions."⁴⁸ In contrast to Van Til, these terms would appear to be epistemological, not ontological, but that point needs to be carefully argued in terms of their discussion. If, as has been argued, Van Til's presuppositionalism is not fideistic, the dispute with rival schools of thought must lie elsewhere than in the use of evidence and proof.

⁴⁵J. W. Montgomery, *Faith Founded On Fact* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978) 92-93 n. 27.

⁴⁶Hanna, *Crucial Questions*, 95.

⁴⁷Geisler, *Christian Apologetics*, 143-45.

⁴⁸G. H. Clark, *A Christian View of Men and Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952) 29.