

A PRIMER ON PRESUPPOSITIONALISM

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"Presuppositionalism" is the name most often given to the variety of Christian apologetics that grows out of the writings of Cornelius van Til. In the following essay we shall consider van Til's general philosophical outlook and how that gives rise to his basic apologetic stance. Admittedly, his ideas were not as rigorously worked out as well as one might have liked, but I'll try to fill in the details as I think he would have liked them to be filled in and with some hints from what I take to be some of his better interpreters (e.g., John Frame, Vern Poythress, etc.). Additionally, I shall consider some of the objections to presuppositionalism and attempt to provide a reply.

The World and God

Let's begin by setting out the general Christian-theistic framework within which van Til's views must be seen. In order to do this we should distinguish between

[a] what the world is like
and

[b] what it might take to show/persuade/convince someone what the world is like
The former, [a], involves some basic issues of metaphysics, aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology which will shape the latter, [b], which involves more apologetics-oriented issues. Van Til's fundamental point is that given what he thinks Scripture teaches about the world God has made and the knowledge that God has given to all persons, the task of apologetics is different from what many assume.

In terms of what the world is like, van Til sees the whole of creation, in its parts and as a whole, as revelatory of God (Romans 1:19-20; Psalm 19; etc.). Moreover, as creatures made in the image of God, human beings are constituted in relationship to God. Since God is a Trinity of persons, and thus social in His nature, so the creation is irreducibly social and personal. As God's own knowledge of Himself is knowledge of Himself as *Logos*--as Word--so all created knowledge is also linguistically mediated knowledge. As the basic Being of God is love, so the basic meaning of the cosmos is love. As God is beautiful, so the creation is beautiful. As all of God's attributes are interrelated (or merely denominative ways of speaking of one simple Trinitarian whole), so created society, language, knowledge, love, and beauty are interrelated. Moreover, knowledge of God, of the world around us, and of ourselves are intimately connected and inseparable (as Calvin famously suggests in the first book of his *Institutes*).

Problems in one area of human life and reality will ramify in all other areas. And so failure to love and trust as God intended for us to love and trust, will have noetic (thinking-related) effects and obscure the truth about God, the world, and ourselves. Likewise, denial of the existence of God will lead to various problems, whether they be ones of logical consistency,

explanation, pragmatic outworkings of belief, lifestyle, distorted relationships of interdependence among beliefs, mystified relationships between belief and power, etc.

The Human Person in God's World

God has so constituted human beings that knowledge of Him is inescapable. We are created to respond to God in faith and so, in some sense or another, all people know God. God, in His immanence, is infinitely close to every one of us. It's not simply a matter of there being good arguments for the existence of God; rather, all people are experientially aware of God, whether they recognize that experience to be what it is or not.

Since humans beings are constituted in this kind of relationship to an infinite, personal Trinity, we are creatures of unimaginable complexity and potential in our personhood and character, both individually and corporately. Thus any fall from what God intended us to be is a great fall indeed. The estrangement from God involved in sin--the rejection of divine love--also estranges us from the world and from ourselves. How great are we as human beings? Great enough to rebel against God and "honestly" to bring ourselves to fail to see Him even though He is infinitely close and present in all our lives and knowledge. Great enough to affect every aspect of ourselves with our sin. Great enough to place ourselves in a position where we will no longer, of ourselves, turn toward God in faith but need His prior grace to draw us back.

Thus, to say that all unbelievers somehow know God, but "suppress" that truth, is not to be taken as an insult or to fail to take the intelligence of unbelievers seriously. Rather, it is a high complement to the capacities of human beings in the image of an infinite, personal Trinity.

Nor should we necessarily theorize the paradoxical position of unbelief in terms of "self-deception." That may be a useful model for some cases, but certainly does not cover *every* case of unbelief. Some unbelief may only be "practical atheism"--admission of the existence of God along with a refusal to live in terms of what God expects of us (faith working itself through love). Some unbelief may involve some kind of experiential or personal awareness of God (knowing God) that, due to the overall shape of one's belief-forming practices, is not permitted to produce the expected propositional beliefs (knowing *that* God...) or at least not producing them in an occult manner. The different strategies adopted by human thought in estrangement from God are as varied and complex as the people who employ them.

Human life and thought is also fundamentally *covenantal* in its structure. Belief-forming practices, conceptual schemes, affective states, pragmatics, teleology of thought and action, etc. are organized around basic kinds of commitments or, what van Til calls, "presuppositions" (thus "presuppositionalism"). Our basic commitment ought to be God--the Trinity in whom we place our trust and affections. Such a commitment, consistently carried out, will organize our lives in such a way so as to be wholly responsive in love to God, to ourselves, to each other, and to His world; and to be responsive in the way He intended for us to be, to live fully as He intended for us to live. As the covenant Lord of our life and thought, God fulfills His promises to us, granting us life and knowledge and personal well-being in relationship with others. We will grow to see better and better God's revelation to us--in the world, in ourselves, in others, in Word and Sacrament--the more and

more we practice His presence within a commitment to Him as our loving divine Husband and covenant Lord.

Apart from this commitment, human life and thought does not cease to be fundamentally covenantal, but rather exchanges the true covenant Lord for a lie, worshipping the creature rather than the creator. This is the essence of idolatry, in which we are all complicit on some level or another, individually or corporately (I think of Merold Westphal's helpful book, *Suspicion and Faith*). When human life and thought becomes organized around a commitment to a covenant Lord other than the true God, this will, of necessity, lead to difficulties. As creatures in the image of the infinite, personal Trinity, we still have basic needs and expectations about what the "god" or "gods" to whom we owe allegiance will promise and deliver (life, knowledge, personhood, etc.). But no god, but God, can deliver on these expectations and promises. Only God is faithful among the gods.

Epistemically, this implies that unbelieving thought can never fully account for itself, even insofar as it is successful, apart from a commitment to God. The success of unbelieving thought, truly depends upon God's gracious preservation of us in relation to Him. Thus, when God is not the ultimate commitment in one's thought and is replaced by something that is not adequate for the task, problems will arise. Perhaps it will be a form of logical incoherence or inconsistency. Perhaps it will be a practical inability to live life in terms of basic commitments. Perhaps it will be a deep sense of dissatisfaction. It all depends upon the situation in question.

In any case, it follows that there is a sense in which logic and induction cannot be fully accounted for apart from a commitment to God (which, as I already indicated, is not a mere assent to His existence, but a loving trust in Him). But where one's account of logic and induction goes wrong really depends upon what the unbelieving basic commitments are. We cannot, therefore, sketch a purely *general* account of how unbelieving thought goes wrong on this point, though one might sketch a Christian view of how logic and induction are related to God.

Defending the Faith

In terms of apologetics, this overall outlook on human thought has a number of implications for how the Christian faith might be defended. First off, it changes the nature of evidential argumentation. There is *sufficient evidence* for all to believe in God and, indeed, all are already aware of God in some way or another. Thus, in unbelief the evidence for the existence of God has already been (ab)used in such a way as to prevent the fullness of knowledge of God--that is, the life and thought of unbelief has been organized around false commitments. What is needed is not primarily an argument, but conversion (*metanoia*).

Second, this does not nullify the use of evidence in any way. From *within* Christian commitment the evidence for the existence of God can be rightly seen and understood--*fides quarens intellectum*. We shouldn't pretend that this same evidence will be apparent to unbelief; that, on the level of human knowledge, it is somehow *so* objective and brute that anyone can see it if they are only clear-headed enough and can follow the steps of the argument or proof. It is this kind of evidentialism that is, in reality, an insult to the power of unbelieving

systems of life, commitment, and thought. Such systems of thought are truly powerful and life-transforming.

Third, a large part of the apologetic project will be to address the specific situation of the interlocutor in terms of her own basic commitments. Part of this will involve trying to uncover those commitments and then, from a standpoint of Christian faith, attempt to show the inadequacies of those idolatrous commitments. These inadequacies will manifest themselves in different ways depending upon the situation. Imagine people you may know who promiscuously move from one failed relationship to another. This kind of failure is not merely noetic, but involves affective baggage, patterns of activity, past history, and the like.

Likewise, unbelief is not primarily an intellectual problem for most people, but involves the same kinds of failures as any other failed relationship. Thus the main point of apologetic focus may not be logical consistency (though it may be so) or the coherence of a worldview (though that is important). Rather it may involve inconsistencies between practical and theoretical concerns. It may involve affective and relational aspects of knowledge--e.g., a person who rejects religion of any kind due to an abusive father who was also, in some manner, "deeply religious." Again, what is needed is as varied and complex as the people involved.

Fourth, once a person has been made aware of the inadequacies of her false covenant lords, the true Covenant Lord, who is always faithful, even through suffering (as demonstrated on the Cross), can be commended. At this point evidence (much of which has been there all along) may take on a new cast or be open to new ways of seeing. It may be possible for the person to see what a new set of commitments might mean and how, given those commitments, the existence of God and trust in Him could be rational, evidentially plausible, and satisfying. The goal of apologetics, then, is not to win an argument, but to commend the Saviour as the One in whom human life, personal relationships, and knowledge can find rest. The epistemological and related issues are only part of a much bigger picture.

This then is my basic interpretation of van Til's perspective. Now we shall turn to some specific objections and attempt to provide an adequate response.

Objections and Replies

Objection: You have presented a version of presuppositionalism that is perhaps, persuasive. If your version is accurate, however, why do so many presuppositionists come across as cocky know-it-alls who continually try to insult non-Christians?

Reply: I would suspect that it is because they are sinners like me who try to speak what they sincerely believe to be the truth, but sometimes have a lot of difficulty doing it in love--especially when one feels in possession of a knock-down argument. Some of these abrasive apologists are just philosophical neophytes who wield arguments like a club. Others just like to argue for the sake of arguing (a not uncommon, but unfortunate trait). There are probably

other factors at work--Reformed culture, bunker mentality, self-righteousness, personality issues, and the like.

Objection: I thought presuppositionalists said things like *only* Christians can possibly have a logically consistent worldview or that no Buddhist can consistently appeal to *modus ponens* or other laws of logic

Reply: I believe I'm being faithful to presuppositionalism, despite the overheated rhetoric used sometimes by presuppositionalists. I'm happy to admit that people other than Christians can hold logically consistent beliefs--there are, I suppose, innumerable sets of propositions that might be believed and are internally logically consistent. I would, however, deny that it is possible for an unbeliever to live in God's world in a consistent way in *every* respect (as is true of all of us ravaged by sin). I just would not want to reduce everything to a matter of *logical* consistency.

Objection: If God is the creator and sustainer of all that is, how can it fail to be true that "the success of unbelieving thought" depends on him? But it hardly follows that belief in God is a necessary condition of "intelligibility."

Reply: Regarding "intelligibility", it really depends how broadly you construe it. Van Til's emphasis seems to be less on the intelligibility of individual propositions ("The weather is warm") than it is on the intelligibility of wider systems of thought and life.

If we view understanding (and intelligibility and consistency) as a continuum, on one end of the continuum we may have what we could call simple "semantic" understanding (involving meanings of words as such, basic syntactical relations and transformations of those words, etc.). Further along the continuum we have what might be called "epistemic" understanding (involving not only semantic understanding, but also, say, an ability to paraphrase, to recognize entailments, to produce evidence for truth or falsity, to list truth conditions, etc.). The far end of the continuum would be what we could call "discursive" understanding (as Foucault, e.g., uses the term, involving not only semantic and epistemic understanding, but also heterogeneous sets of lived practices, subjective positions, conceptual schemes, institutions, regulative functions, affective content, etc.).

While it is possible that an unbelieving worldview may involve an inconsistency or lack of understanding on the semantic level (a bald contradiction) rendering it unintelligible, that's not very likely. Van Til's emphasis seems to be more on the end of continuum ranging from epistemic to discursive concerns. While all knowledge depends upon God in a purely metaphysical sense, a fully consistent and intelligible worldview--as that is considered epistemically and discursively--will also have to be organized around dependence upon God in the sense of a grateful, loving trust. In that sense, then, belief *in* God (not mere assent to propositions *about* God, however important that may be) is necessary for a worldview to be intelligible in a richly discursive way.

By God's grace, through conversion to faith in God in Christ, our worldviews are, *in principle*, redeemed--though the faith-filled process of continually mortifying our pet idolatries and sanctifying our thought and life is an ongoing struggle for a Christian.

Objection: Then is there no point of contact between belief and unbelief? Are systems of thought (unbelieving or otherwise) so truly powerful that they completely seal folk off from communicating with those in other systems, however partially? Or is it not rather the case that common grace can provide the "bridge" for saving grace?

Reply: *Qua* systems rooted in unbelief, non-Christian thought about life is, as van Til says, completely antithetical to Christianity. But no system of thought and life can be entirely rooted in unbelief since God has made Himself known to all. That is a point of contact. The offensive strategy is to play up difficulties to which unbelief may lead, *qua* unbelief. The defensive strategy is to try to show how a Christian commitment might make better sense of it all--how all the aspects of human thought and life, insofar as they stem from a revelation of God Himself, need a living faith to set them on a sure foundation.

Objection: How can presuppositionalists maintain that some sort of "transcendental argument" for the existence of God is sound?

Reply: I guess I should begin addressing this by pointing out that "transcendental argument" is not van Til's own usual terminology for explaining the apologetic process as he discusses it (though he did speak of arguing in transcendental terms--regarding conditions of possibility, etc.). Rather, this terminology is most closely associated with Greg Bahnsen's use of van Til's thought. I must admit that I am not entirely comfortable with it for several reasons.

First, it seems to imply that there is some kind of standard "transcendental proof" of the Christian faith in a sense that is, at least, analogous to what St. Thomas Aquinas thought he was doing in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. I think that is a mistake. There's no such thing as *the* transcendental argument. What there are, are transcendental *strategies* for defending the Faith against unbelief.

Second, if we view these transcendental strategies as a "proof" we run into difficulties. One possible strategy that might be considered a proof is the attempt to show the "impossibility of the contrary" of Christianity, but it would be necessary to do so for *every* possible contrary. One could attempt to derive contradictions, inconsistencies, or kinds of unintelligibility (logical, practical, or otherwise) from the alternatives to Christianity. If this were successful, I suppose one would have gone a long way towards some kind of objective "proof" of Christian theism by process of elimination.

But that's the problem. Even if every other contender is problematic and even if you could show that to be the case (and imagine the odds of being able to do *that!*), you are not really left with anything deserving the title of "proof." For the purposes of proof you can't just

eliminate the contenders and then *assume* the coherence of Christianity. You must try to demonstrate it.

Another possible strategy that might be considered a transcendental proof, is simply an indirect proof. You start with a definition of Christian theism (probably a series of conjoined propositions we can call "CT"), you deny the definition ("not-CT"), and through the addition of other true premises and various logical steps, you derive a contradiction from the denial of Christian theism. Thus you can conclude that "CT" is true and have shown the impossibility of the contrary.

The problem, of course, is that if you were actually arguing with someone, the premises which are added would probably be questioned and stand in need of further support. After all, the premises will, no doubt, include propositions like "Jesus rose from the dead" or "For every existing thing, there needs to be a reason for its existence" and so on. But now you're just back to giving the traditional proofs in an indirect form.

Third, we are thus left with the question as to what actually counts as a transcendental strategy in a vanTillian sense. As I have already indicated, in some sense, the Christian faith stands in no need of proof since all people know God. The difficulty is human faithlessness, ingratitude, and idolatry. What strategy is employed is situation-specific.

Van Til wants to emphasize that, as Christians we never suppose a position of neutrality, but "transcendentally" show the weakness and foolishness of idolatry from a standpoint of faith. That's why our ultimate goal is always to commend the Savior as the Covenant Lord who will keep His promises and bless those who are faithful to Him. Since we are convinced that Christianity is really the only fully consistent and intelligible alternative to faithlessness (in the rich discursive sense of intelligibility and understanding I suggested above), we don't need to bother trying to tear down every possible contender to Christianity, but only whatever proves a barrier in a given apologetic encounter. In this way we maintain the "impossibility of the contrary."

The positive account that Christianity provides for the issues involved in those barriers to faith is also presented, whether that takes the form of underlining the ways faith sees the evidence of God's existence (as with the use of traditional arguments) or an appeal to the heart to find the solace that faith finds in God or an appeal to the will to obey as does the obedience of faith or (most likely) some combination. Since the unbeliever knows God on some level, we pray that the Holy Spirit may use our words to bring the heart of the unbeliever to rest in the promises of Christ. That's the "transcendental strategy" as I see it.

Objection: Are you saying that all unbelievers are culpable for their unbelief? Even if we grant that it may well be the case that everyone experiences "something" which is in fact identical with God, many people fail to *recognize* it as such. Thus we must face the following questions. What reasons are there for making this identification between a certain range of experience and God? Are these reasons strong enough to make unbelief culpable? Are those who fail to *recognize* this special range of experience *as* the presence of God necessarily being

dishonest or unreasonable? Is their failure necessarily motivated by sinful rebellion and pride?

It is just at this point that we need to learn how to *listen* to unbelievers, and not make *a priori* claims about their intellectual integrity. Given the way in which you express yourself, it is not clear that you disagree. So are you, or are you not, defending the claim that failure to believe *that* God exists is culpable? If you are defending this claim, then what it is that, according to your way of thinking, *makes* it culpable?

Reply: Much of this depends how you fill in and individuate the proposition "God exists" and so what exactly you think God has made clear about Himself through His revelation.

I certainly don't mean that God expects everyone to derive Trinitarian orthodoxy from her experience of God in the world. On the other hand, Romans 1 seems to indicate that certain things have been made clear: that there exists a powerful, eternal, divine being of some sort or another. But even that is not the fundamental question. Romans also implies that this Being has revealed Himself sufficiently that, apart from sin, people would respond with worship and thanksgiving.

So the question is, given the experience of God that all people possess--an experience that, in some sense qualifies as knowledge of God--how do they handle and appropriate that experience? Do they respond with thanksgiving--a trusting love? Or do they exchange the truth of God for something less, worshipping a creature rather than the Creator, failing to give thanks? This is more a matter of the heart than of the intellect, though I would expect it to have intellectual fallout as well ("their understanding was darkened"). Nevertheless, the primary problem is not one of intellectual dishonesty or lack of integrity or mere irrationality.

I would, therefore, locate the culpability, in the first instance, in the attitude of the heart towards God rather than in any specific propositional content. Now, apart from grace, none of us, as fallen people, possess the requisite attitude of faith. We are prideful and rebels and quite responsible for that. On the other hand, the very revelation of God in creation, that experiential awareness, is itself a gift of grace. The question, then, is how we respond to the grace that is given.

The specific question of propositional content has to be dealt with on more of a case-by-case basis. Given any situation one has to ask what beliefs would be formed if that situation were transformed by a basic attitude of trust, worship, and gratitude. What God expects in terms of belief for a person raised in the Church (assent to the "catholic Faith" of the Creeds) is different than what God expected of Abraham (initially, heeding God's call and faith in His promise) which, in turn, is different than what He would expect of an infant, a person of diminished intellectual capacity, or a pagan.

At least that's how I would handle the question. Now, I think it also perfectly appropriate, from within a standpoint of Christian faith, to tease out the implications of, say, Buddhism, and try to show how Christianity meets the challenge of Buddhism, provides answers and a *praxis* that are superior in some regards, and also, along the way, pointing out whatever

inconsistencies (logical, practical, or otherwise) might be generated by the worldview in question.

But to show that something is a false religion is not *necessarily* to say that a person within that religion might not somehow, by God's grace, be responding in trust and gratitude to God's revelation of Himself. However, Scripture gives us no confidence, in my opinion, that there are any people in such a situation and the burden of proof would lie with those who maintain otherwise. I also imagine that as the religionists of Jesus' day *would* have believed in Christ had they truly believed in Moses, so also those religionists of our day who supposedly trust a "hidden Christ of Buddhism" (or whatever), *would* come to faith in Jesus upon hearing the Gospel *kerygma*.

Objection: What reason do you have for thinking that there is some kind of basic "awareness" of God that non-Christians (most people in the world) can't be or at least aren't consciously aware of? Is it anything more than Biblical *a priori* psychology?

Reply: Well, as a Christian, I do have to take account of the "Biblical *a priori* psychology." The Scriptures seem pretty clear that God has revealed Himself not only to Israel, but to the nations. Besides, I'm not sure how "*a priori*" this psychology is. I suspect the apostle Paul had quite a bit of experience dealing with unbelievers of all stripes and found the "psychology" he outlines in Romans 1 to ring true.

Furthermore, I believe that I have found extensive confirmation of this Biblical outlook in my own experience, in my own interaction with various people, and in the testimony of others. We can also recall missionary stories in which the reaction to the first hearing of the Gospel is along the lines of, "This answers the longings and questions I've had all my life," or even, "All our ancient stories point to questions and perspectives that are now answered in this Jesus of which you speak." We cannot dismiss *all* such tales as rhetoric designed just to raise money for missions agencies. Moreover, they are well attested to throughout Christian history.

It is also the case that the "biblical psychology" reflects my own psychology. Many times my own bad attitude, my own lack of trust, and my general spiritual laziness had led to blindness in respect to God's hand in my life, His presence and love, His Word to me in the preaching of the Gospel, His encouragement to me through fellow believers, and His grace offered to me in the Eucharist. Still, these revelations of divine love are clear and obvious and, in some way, I am well aware of them. But this awareness apart from a living growing trust can lead to shame and guilt, broken fellowship, bitterness, and the like, all the more obscuring the work and presence of Christ in a subjectively conscious and apparent manner. I need--and suspect all Christians need--to constantly pray, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."

I have also known an individual who found faith difficult (including assent even to God's existence), because he was afraid that God would not accept such a one as he (he was living in a manner which was obviously contrary to traditional Christian morality). It seems to me, however, that his fear was not merely hypothetical (i.e., *if* there were a God, *then* I would be

afraid). The whole existential quality of the fear indicated to me an awareness of God and the fact that God was not happy about his lifestyle, along with a sense of his own personal inability to do anything of his own--apart from Christ--to please God. But that awareness was not something to which he would admit (the fear itself only came out after extensive conversation). Only when confronted with the truth of God, in the confidence that what God has revealed is clear and such an awareness was real, did he begin to see the freedom from guilt and fear offered in Christ by faith.

I also know a few people who profess absolutely no belief in God and count themselves atheists, who yet spend an unwarranted amount of time making their convictions clear, being abusive (or at least patronizing) towards people of faith, and showing indications of great discomfort (not just unfamiliarity or awkwardness, but real *angst*) around clergypersons, churches, and the like. Some of these folks were raised with no religious upbringing and so it can't be attributed to bad past experiences with religion. A couple of people I know who were atheists like this have subsequently come to faith in Christ and readily admit that their previous behavior is best explained not so much in terms of an atheistic *unawareness* of God, but in terms of an intellectualized account of reality (philosophical atheism) that they built up to run away from a God they in some sense knew to be there.

I could multiply stories like this with accounts of returns of people who became agnostic or atheistic after having God disappoint them deeply; with tales of converts from non-Christian religions who found their own religious longings and sensitivities fulfilled in Christ; and so on. I could also point out the pervasiveness of various kinds of theisms, or at least a "religious sense," and the relative rarity of outright atheism. I could suggest that the awareness of God and His nature is part of the source of the widespread sense of a moral reality and of being held personally responsible to some kind of moral standard (even for those who hold that the cosmos is ultimately impersonal). While such things may have many cultural factors at work in them, you have to ask why so many cultures cultivate such beliefs and why those beliefs seem so right in a very "gut-level" way.

I really do believe, then, that there is abundant *a posteriori* evidence for some kind of universal awareness of God. Moreover, that conviction, while rooted in Scripture, has been confirmed time and again by personal experience, witness to the lives of others, and worthy testimony. It is not merely an *a priori* assertion.

Objection: Let's accept what Romans 1 says about the existence of God having been "made clear." But doesn't the outworking of this depend upon what you count as "making clear"? What if we hold out for a fairly strict understanding of this? If, for example, God has "made it clear" to all and sundry that he exists, then there would either have to be easily discoverable *arguments* that would be appreciated by any rational person, or else there would have to be an experience of God that *demand*s a theistic interpretation in a way that is obvious to everyone. In that case, recognizing the experience of God *as* a personal and loving power is just as unavoidable as recognizing someone else *as* a highly intelligent and sensitive person.

Reply: Perhaps recognizing God in this way *is* as unavoidable as recognizing someone as intelligent and sensitive. Perhaps all people *do* recognize the experience of God in this way on some level. All I'm saying is that this recognition need not produce propositional assent in any obvious manner, especially apart from the requisite attitude of faith. You may, in some way, recognize me as a certain kind of person--after all, those characteristics are clear and obvious. Nevertheless, that recognition might not make for any particular propositional attitude in any obvious way.

For instance, due to a previous association with someone who looked a lot like me but, say, physically abused you as a child, you may never come to a conscious affirmation of what positive traits you recognize in me, even if that recognition might manifest itself in some other way. It would be a peculiar situation, but need not be seen in terms of lack of integrity or intellectual dishonesty or utter irrationality. In fact, the situation is quite understandable. You can even honestly say that you never noticed those things about me and don't even really see them now that someone points them out to you--despite the fact that they are clear and obvious. All the same, the failure to make this recognition may involve some kind of moral failing on your part--a failure to approach life with the attitude of trust and love that the example of Christ would demand.

Or consider a woman for whom it ought to be clear that her husband is cheating on her--the evidence is all there. It is possible that she is aware of his infidelity even to the point of acting jealous and trying extra hard to please him (since, after all, she loves the creep). Yet, she may not be able to admit that of which she is aware, even to herself. Thus she completely lacks any occurent belief that her husband is unfaithful. Perhaps she doesn't believe it propositionally at all (I'm not sure and it would depend upon the specific case). Nevertheless, she *is* aware of it (as, at least, a kind of personal or experiential knowledge). When she later admits it to herself, she may also become aware that in some sense she "knew it all along."

Now God is infinitely more personal and closer to each one of us than any other person. Moreover, our commitments regarding God affect our whole personality and outlook in ways that are deeper and more pervasive than any others. Thus, the paradoxical ability to recognize God's presence and revelation of Himself along with our ability to avoid the conscious manifestation of that recognition is all the more profound.

Objection: Let's put it another way. Isn't faith a response of the heart to an epistemically ambiguous situation--ambiguous in the sense that persons of high intelligence and good will can look at the evidence of God's existence and find it wanting? Like all other sinners, they may justly be blamed for lots of things. But they should *not* be blamed for their lack of faith.

Reply: It is the "good will" part that is the problem. If we really are sinners and naturally have no faith in God (in whatever sense you might allow for that), then we lack a "good will" in any supernaturally good sense. Such a "good will" is impossible apart from grace manifest in faith (as I think Scripture teaches and as it has been historically interpreted within the Church). We need to respond with thanksgiving and trusting love to what God has made

known of Himself. But it is precisely such a lack of a trusting, loving, thankful "good will" for which we are responsible and why unbelief (in its various forms) is, often enough, culpable.

Objection: To *what* are we supposed to respond with thanksgiving and trusting love? To God? But this cannot really be an issue for the person who does not yet believe that God exists. So unless that person is to blame for not believing the proposition *that* God exists, she can hardly be blamed for failing to love and trust him.

Reply: Is it really necessary to have a fully conscious propositional commitment to the existence of God in order to respond with thanksgiving and love? Consider infants and their mothers' smiles. They know their mothers and they know their mothers' love--but do they know the propositions *that* their mothers exist and *that* they are loved by them, apart from the conceptual apparatus to form such beliefs? Likewise, unbelievers may know God quite well.

Objection: Okay. Let's grant this "hidden" awareness of God on the part of unbelievers. The question then is, "What good is it?" Wouldn't the sort of awareness that is important be the sort of awareness that leads to or compels belief in Christianity? And, evidence for *that* kind of awareness seems to be lacking. After all, honest, sincere people all over the world, upon contemplating religious and spiritual issues, come to conclusions that contradict Christianity.

Reply: Is the problem with God's revelation of Himself or with those who perceive it? I would say the latter. Apart from faith we can be aware of the Trinity--what St. Maximus called the eternal movement of love--but only as people who do not even begin to embody the love of that Trinity as revealed in Christ. As people plagued by lovelessness, broken relationships, petty jealousies, and the like, our awareness of the God of love can only be frightening. As Julian of Norwich said, the wrath of God is how the God of love appears to those to refuse His love. In any case, as sinners we have every motivation not to see the clear revelation of God or desire to enter into relationship with Him. It is only by His grace as He draws people to Himself in faith that we begin to be able to appropriate that revelation in a conscious, meaningful way. Christians need, I think, to proclaim the Gospel of grace in Christ--the accomplishment of reconciliation between humanity and God--with the boldness of those who know God is near, if only we begin, by faith, to have the eyes to see.

If there are true, honest, sincere seekers in other religions, then that itself is only by the grace of God and He will be found by them. But I suspect that most of the religious systems of mankind--including even the Christian community much of the time--are more idolatrous ways of obscuring the revelation of God, than they are true ways of salvation. Even if God is at work elsewhere, it is to the earthen vessel of the Church that God has committed the Gospel of salvation and it is the job of Christians to bring that Gospel to the world. The

fullness of God's grace in Christ is found only in that Gospel in the Church, by the Word, sacraments, prayer, and fellowship.

In regard to providing evidence that would "compel" belief, I wonder how such evidence could be possible? We are people created in the image of an infinite, personal God--created to be in relationship with Him, with our own tremendous abilities and depths. As such people *how* could God have made us to be truly like Himself--apt for fellowship with Him, destined to be caught up into the very life of the Trinity--but *not* have also given us the ability to reject Him and obscure our awareness of His self-revelation? What would that scenario look like? It seems to me that it is beyond the realm of logical possibility.

Only with such a vision of the true God-likeness and dignity of humanity, I think, can our fall into sin be seen for the tragedy that it is and for the extent of its (self-)destructive power. But thanks be to God for His grace in Jesus Christ to deliver such people as us.

Objection: You keep appealing to Romans 1 to prove your biblical psychology that all people are aware of God. It is possible, however, to give an alternate reading of this text as describing the fall of humanity in Adam and the world under the power of sin. Thus its point is generic (and not about individual psychology) and hyperbolic (citing the extreme). Romans must be read redemptive-historically, not systematic theologically. Moreover, the purpose of this chapter is not to give Christians reasons to feel superior to non-Christians.

Reply: Actually I agree with such an "alternative" reading of Romans. Romans is far more redemptive-historical and social in its thrust than it is systematic theological, though any redemptive-historical interpretation is always already systematizing. Still, even if chapter 1 is generic and, to a degree, hyperbolic, I don't think that means it doesn't apply individually as well. Moreover, Romans 1 is not alone in this perspective. The Scriptures everywhere maintain that God is clearly revealed.

I also heartily agree that Romans 1 gives no basis for feelings of Christian superiority--it is a description of every one of us apart from the grace of God manifesting itself in our union with Christ through the gift of faith. But it also describes the world under the power of sin to which we are called to bring this Gospel of grace, speaking truth in love. The concern of presuppositionalism, I think, is to take this description seriously in order to communicate all the better the immensity of God's grace in Christ to fallen humanity. This includes taking full account of the destructiveness of sin in all aspects of human life, including the noetic aspects.

Objection: Every time I read van Til I have a strongly negative reaction, especially in regard to his vicious critique and caricature of Karl Barth. My strongly negative reaction to Van Til may make it more difficult for me to assess Van Til's presuppositionalism fairly--though I think most of my objections have to do with real problems with the substance of his work.

Reply: I think it is helpful to consider van Til's theological temperament and the context from which he was coming. Van Til was trying to make a clean break with liberalism and modernism (remember it was J. Gresham Machen who brought him to Westminster Seminary). For him it was necessary to see things in fairly stark, antithetical terms--in a way, van Til *contra mundum*. He was quite intolerant of any form of interaction, appropriation, or dialogue that even seemed to compromise the faith--and given his situation I think we need to cut him slack. The difficulty is when something that was to some degree sensible, given a context (e.g., the fundamentalist-modernist controversy), gets ossified into a hard and fast principle for all time.

Second, we should be willing to admit that Barth's earlier theology (e.g., in *Der Romerbrief*) was plagued by a certain dialecticism. Van Til was trying to point out that if Barth were consistent with the assumptions of that dialecticism, his theological system would crumble (of course, the same could be said of van Til's apparently Idealist assumptions). In regard to the later Barth (especially as you proceed from the *Christian Dogmatics* into the *Church Dogmatics*), the dialecticism recedes and van Til's criticisms seem more and more to warrant Hans Urs von Balthasar's description of them as "*vollig grotesk*." Nevertheless, some of van Til's misgivings about Barth's theology are on target.

Finally, one must also consider that van Til and Barth actually have an awful lot in common (as does the Catholic von Balthasar). Part of that, I think, explains van Til's adverse reaction to Barth. Seeing too much of himself in Barth, he wanted to put a lot of distance between Barth and himself.