

At War With the Word: The Necessity of Biblical Antithesis

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The following discussion is an excerpt from the 1987 Van Til Lectures, delivered by Dr. Bahnsen at Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia.

The antithesis between followers of God and followers of Satan is sovereignly inflicted as God's judicial curse. This enmity is not only social but also intellectual in nature, and, therefore, to ignore it in our apologetic is to compromise the gospel.

Without the ingredient of *antithesis*, Christianity is not simply anemic, it has altogether forfeited its challenge to all other worldviews. Anyone who is familiar with the corpus of Van Til's publications and writings will recognize that the subject of antithesis is one fitting hallmark of his scholarly contribution to twentieth century apologetical theory.

Antithesis in Van Til's Apologetic

It was in the interest of antithesis that Van Til wrote his first major classroom syllabus, now entitled *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, stating that, "It is necessary to become clearly aware of the deep antithesis between the two main types of epistemology," Christian and non-Christian.[\[1\]](#) It was in the interest of antithesis that Van Til published his first major book on the "Crisis Theology" of Barth and Brunner, entitled *The New Modernism*, hoping to alert the Christian church to the fact that Barth's dialectical theology was fundamentally one with modernistic theology -- and that "the new Modernism and the old alike are destructive of historic Christian theism and with it of the significant meaning of human experience."[\[2\]](#)

It was with the interest of a proper understanding of antithesis that Van Til, in the next year, published his second book on the subject of *Common Grace*, where the fundamental premise was that "the believer and the non-believer differ at the outset of every self-conscious investigation."[\[3\]](#) And perhaps the most memorable section of Van Til's basic text in apologetics, *The Defense of the Faith*, is precisely his treatment of the mock dialogue in which Mr. Grey, the evangelical apologist, does not appreciate, to his detriment, the significance of the philosophical antithesis between belief and unbelief.[\[4\]](#)

This theme of the principal, epistemological and ethical antithesis between the regenerate, Bible-directed mind of the Christian and the autonomous mind of the sinner (whether expressed by the avowed unbeliever or by the unorthodox modern theologian), remained part of Van Til's distinctive teaching throughout his career. Indeed, his *festschrift* bears the pertinent title *Jerusalem and Athens* -- based on Tertullian's famous antithetical quip "what indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?"

In his own essay for that volume, entitled "My Credo," Van Til condensed his conception of apologetics, guided by the thought of antithesis, into a concluding summary, where he wrote:

My own proposal, therefore, for a consistently Christian methodology of apologetics is this... That we no longer make an appeal to "common notions" which the Christian and non-Christian agree on, but to the "common ground" which they actually have because man and his world are what Scripture says they are. That we... set the non-Christian principle of the rational autonomy of man against the Christian principle of the dependence of man's knowledge on God's knowledge as revealed in the person and by the Spirit of Christ. That we claim, therefore, that Christianity alone is reasonable for men to hold...That we argue, therefore, by "presupposition."[\[5\]](#)

The aim of the present discussion is to address the subject of the antithetical nature of Christianity and its significance for apologetics. It was one of the burdens of Van Til's later work, *Toward a Reformed Apologetics*, to urge Reformed apologists not to be philosophical (or speculative) first, then Biblical afterwards. Rather, said Van Til, if we would be true to the Christ of the Scriptures, we must first listen to his word in the Bible and from that starting point proceed to think through all philosophical issues. Van Til ended this pamphlet with these words:

Rather than wedding Christianity to the philosophies of Aristotle or Kant, we must openly challenge the apostate philosophic constructions of men by which they seek to suppress the truth about God themselves, and the world...It is only if we demand of men complete submission to the living Christ of the Scriptures in every area of their lives that we have presented to men the claims of the Lord Christ without compromise. It is only then that we are truly Biblical first and speculative afterwards. Only then are we working toward a *Reformed apologetic*.[\[6\]](#)

Following Van Til's exhortation, I will begin with a survey of the Biblical view of the antithesis between believer and unbeliever.

1. The Antithesis is Crucial to the Biblical Understanding of Man

A. The Biblical Narrative

1. *Geneis 3:15* -- We read in this verse, "I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you will bruise his heel." A correct view of man, his historical setting and problem, and God's resultant relationship to man is tied up with the Biblical presentation of man's Fall and God's response to it. [Genesis 3:15](#) is often designated the *protoevangelium*, the first proclamation of good news for man's salvation. However, that good news of the victorious confrontation of the Saviour with Satan cannot be understood except against the background of what precedes it. There is preceding it, of course, (1) the fact that man's guilty conscience created alienation between him and his wife, as well as a desire to flee from the presence of God (vv. 7-8), and (2) the fact that God's curse was pronounced against the serpent precisely because he dared to beguile man into repudiating the self-establishing authority of God's word (v.14). Both of these facts point to the spiritual antithesis inherent in the present human situation.

But more pointedly, the antithesis is explicitly declared by God in verse fifteen, where He said that He "will *put enmity*" between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent -- between the children of God (who are united with their Savior, the Messiah: cf. [Gal. 3:16,29](#)) and the children of the devil (cf. [John 8:44](#)). It is worth noting that the emphasis falls upon the word "enmity" as the first word in the Hebrew of [Genesis 3:15](#) ("Enmity will I put"). And God himself is said to constitute, establish, and deliberately impose this enmity between men.

The opposition and antithesis between followers of God and followers of Satan is not simply predicted by God and is not simply commanded; it is sovereignly inflicted as God's judicial curse. The distinction and antipathy between the two seeds must and indeed will be maintained. Only in that light do we properly understand and hope in the Messiah's crushing defeat of the tempter. Were that antithesis disregarded, diluted or dispelled, the very meaning of the gospel of salvation would be lost -- either by consigning all men indiscriminately to the perdition of Satan, or by neglecting the discriminating love of God, which Paul says in [Colossians 1:13](#), "delivered us out of the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of His beloved son."

The entire Biblical message of redemption and the historical establishing of God's kingdom both presuppose "the antithesis," then, between the people of God and the culture of unbelief, between the regenerate and the unregenerate. Therefore, throughout history Satan has tempted God's people to compromise "the antithesis" -- whether by intermingling in ungodly marriages ([Gen. 5:2](#)), or by showing unwarranted tolerance toward the enemies of God ([Joshua 23:11-13](#); [Judges 1:21,27-36](#); [Ps 106:34-35](#)), or by departing from the authority of God's word so that "every man does what is right in his own eyes," ([Judges 21:25](#)), by committing spiritual adultery with other gods (e.g. [Ps. 106:36,39](#); [Hosea 2:2-13, 4:12](#); [Exek. 16:15-25](#)), by trusting in some power other than God (e.g. [Kings 18:21](#); [Chron. 16: 7-9](#); [Isa 30:7, 31:1](#); [Ezek 16:26-29](#)), or by repudiating the Messiah along with the world ([John 1:10-11](#)), or by bowing the knee both to Christ and to Caesar (cf. [Acts 17:7](#); [Rev 13:8,11-17](#)).

In fact, Satan even dared to tempt Jesus, the Son of God, to achieve God's ends by compromising the antithesis with Satan himself. In [Matt 4:8-10](#), you remember how Satan showed Jesus the kingdoms of the world, and he said all of them would belong to Jesus if He would just bow his knee to Satan. (Of course, they belonged to Jesus anyway. Satan was proposing a shortcut.) So if we would live up to Paul's assessment that Christians "are not ignorant of his [Satan's] devices" ([II Corinthians 2:11](#)), then we must be sure not to ignore the tempter's persistent device of suggesting that we can tone down or disregard the antithesis which God has imposed between His people and the world.

2. [Genesis 4](#) -- In the fourth chapter of Genesis, we read that Cain murdered his brother, Abel, because God had respect unto Abel's offering instead of Cain's. The antagonism between those who please God and those who do not was already at work then in human history. And John tells us specifically that this event illustrated the enmity which arises between the two seeds, for he says, "Cain was of the evil one." He was of the seed of the

serpent, and he slew his brother precisely "because his works were evil and his brother's righteous" ([I John 3:12](#)).

3. *Subsequent Portions of Genesis* -- The antithesis continues to be pressed in the literature of the Bible as the descendants of Cain and their accompanying culture are now distinguished from those of Seth in the fourth Chapter of Genesis. The family of Noah is set apart from the rest of mankind for preservation through the flood in [Genesis 5-9](#). The seed of Shem is set apart from the seed of his brothers in [Genesis 10](#). The ungodly attempt to unify all mankind at the tower of Babel is thwarted by God in [Genesis 11](#). Abraham and his seed are specifically chosen out of all the other families of the earth in [Genesis 12-15](#). The line of Isaac is chosen over that of Ishmael in [Genesis 16-18](#). The line of Jacob is chosen over that of Esau in [Genesis 25](#).

4. *Exodus through Joshua* -- Eventually the children of Israel are called out of the land of Egypt, as the Book of Exodus shows us, to displace the Canaanite tribes and be established as a holy people unto God (as we read in the Book of Joshua).

Accompanying these Biblical stories, we read repeatedly of the hostility which exists between God's children and those of the world. We see this whether we look at Ishmael's persecuting mockery of Isaac in [Gen 21:9](#) (cf. [Gal 4:29](#)) or Pharaoh's harsh and murderous oppression of the Jewish slaves in [Exod. 1:18-22](#) (cf. [Heb. 11:23-27](#)), or Israel's military campaigns against Canaan's abominable places of worship in [Deuteronomy 7:24-25, 12:2-3](#).

5. *The Psalms and Prophetic Literature* -- The theme of antithesis thus runs through the Biblical drama like a subtle, unifying thread. We hear the theme of antithesis in the imprecatory psalms against God's enemies, and in the prophetic denunciation of the nations, especially against the ruthless empires of Assyria and Babylon which took God's chosen people into captivity.

6. *The Law* -- The necessity of living in terms of "the antithesis" is buttressed by the Mosaic laws' demand that God's chosen people be a "holy" people, separated from pagan unbelief and practices (e.g. [Leviticus 11:44-45](#); [I Pet 1:15-16](#)). On this basis Peter says in the New Testament that we are to be sanctified in all manner of living. It was reiterated in the call of the prophets to "come out from among them and be separate" and "touch no unclean thing," ([Isa 52:11; Jer 31:1](#)), which is quoted by Paul in [II Corinthians 6:17-7:1](#). We're to be cleansed from all defilement of flesh and spirit. Now both of these moral injunctions assume and endorse an antithesis between the lifestyle of believers and unbelievers, and both injunctions are repeated for us in the New Testament. We had better take them seriously.

7. *The New Testament* -- In the New Testament we see further evidence of, and a demand for, the antithesis between the church and the world. Jesus emphasized and called for a clear observation of that antithesis when He proclaimed "he who is not with me is against me." ([Matt. 12:30](#)), because, he said, "no man can serve two masters" ([Matt. 6:24](#)). And

Jesus identified "*the enemy*," (that language is conspicuous), the *enemy* of the Kingdom ([Matt. 13:39](#)), as Satan. Peter called him the believer's "adversary" ([I Pet. 5:8](#)).

And Paul utilized military imagery to rouse us to withstand the principalities and powers and spiritual hosts of wickedness ([Eph 6:10-17](#)). There is, according to the New Testament outlook, clearly a hostile encounter taking place in the world.

A graphic illustration of the antithesis, or enmity, between the seed of the serpent and the seed which belongs to God, is found in the account of Elymas the sorcerer, whom Paul denounced as "a son of the devil," because he "opposed" the apostles by trying to turn aside Sergius Paulus from the faith, and by always "perverting the right ways of the Lord" ([Acts 13](#)).

We must call [Genesis 3:15](#) to mind again when Jesus calls those who oppose the kingdom of God, "the sons of the evil one" ([Matt. 13:38](#)), and when Paul identifies them as the "enemies" of Christ's cross who mind earthly things, in contrast to the Christians' heavenly citizenship ([Phil.3:18-20](#)).

The apostle John reinforces the necessity of the antithesis by issuing the following command to believers in [I John 2:15](#): "Love not the world...If any man loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." And James drives home the antithesis pungently by declaring, "whoever would be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" ([James 4:4](#)).

To end our short survey, we can finally observe that the antithesis will, once and for all, be ultimately confirmed by the eternal separation of all men into either heaven or hell, as Jesus taught in [Matthew 25:31-33,40](#).

B. The Significance for Apologetics

The primary significance for apologetics of the Biblical teaching that there is a fundamental, everlasting and irreconcilable antithesis between the regenerate and unregenerate is found in the observation that this antithesis applies just as much to the mental life and conduct of men as it does to their other affairs. The "enmity" between Satan's seed and God's seed which is seminally spoken of in [Genesis 3:15](#) is intellectual in nature, as well as social, or familial, or economic, or military, or political, or what have you.

Consider the words of Paul in [Romans 8:7](#): "the mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be." The mentality of those who are unregenerate (those who are in the flesh) cannot subject itself to the truth of God's Word. There is, then, no peace between the mindset of the unbeliever and the mind of God (which believers seek to reflect, cf. [John 15:15](#); [I Cor. 2:16](#)). They are rather at "enmity" with each other.

Paul similarly describes the unregenerate, unreconciled spiritual condition of unbelievers in [Colossians 1:21](#), when he says "they are alienated and enemies in their mind" (*enemies in their mind*) against God. The "enmity" is specifically one which is worked out "in the mind" or thinking of the unbeliever. The unbeliever is unable to be subject to the law's greatest command, which is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all of your soul and with all of your mind" ([Matt. 22:36-37](#)). Instead, the unbeliever "hates the wisdom and instruction" of God, as [Proverbs 1:7](#) puts it. Although the fear of the Lord is the beginning -- the very starting point -- of knowledge, there is no fear of God before the unbeliever's eyes ([Rom 3:18](#)). He is, as such, kept from realizing any of the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" which are deposited in Christ. ([Colossians 2:3](#)) The unbeliever's intellectual enmity against God is simultaneously his epistemological undoing.

Paul concisely lays out the epistemological enmity of which we are speaking, and he plainly points to its consequences, in [Colossians 2:8](#) -- "take heed, lest anyone rob you [that is, rob you of the wisdom of the treasures of knowledge spoken of in verse three preceding] through his philosophy, even vain deceit, which is after the traditions of men, after the rudimentary assumptions of the world, and not after Christ." Here, Paul sets a philosophy which is "after Christ" in antithesis to one that is "after worldly" presuppositions (his word is "rudiments": the elementary principles of learning) and human traditions. And Paul says that the latter will have the effect of depriving those who maintain it of knowledge. Those who "suppress the truth in unrighteousness," are not only "without excuse" for their line of reasoning, but they also become "vain in their reasoning, their senseless hearts being darkened" ([Rom 1:18,20-21](#)).¹ Unbelieving philosophy is not "philosophy", (etymologically "the love of wisdom") at all. The arguments of unregenerate men against the Christian faith are thus only "the oppositions of knowledge falsely-so-called" ([I Tim 6:20](#)), the foolish reasoning of those "that oppose themselves" ([II Tim 2:25](#)) in the process of prosecuting their enmity or hostility against God.

Now the apologist must realize these implications and thereby seek to expose the utter epistemological futility of the unbeliever's reasoning. Paul's challenge was this : "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" ([I Cor. 1:20](#)). It was his conviction that, because the unregenerate mind is at enmity with God's Word and Spirit -- and thus also with the thinking of God's people who are "renewed in the spirit of their minds" ([Ephesians 4:23](#)) -- unbelievers, whether they are scholars or not, "walk in the vanity of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, *alienated* from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their hearts." If ever there was an indictment, line after line, Paul gives it in [Ephesians 4:17-18](#).

The defender of the faith who is faithful to the Biblical faith he defends, will not seek to abandon or diminish the crucial antithesis which exists between the philosophical reasoning of the regenerate mind and the self-destructive reasoning of the unregenerate mind. He will, as Paul says in [II Corinthians 10:5](#), "cast down reasonings and every lofty thing exalted against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ." The antithesis must be central and indispensable to the work of the

apologist as an ambassador for Christ in the intellectual arena, who beseeches men to be reconciled to God ([II Corinthians 5:20](#)).

2. But Modern Thought Disregards and Disdains the Antithesis

The spirit of our age or culture, however, is not only antithetical to the perspective of God's Spirit as generally revealed in the Scriptures; it is in particular antithetical to the Biblical view of antithesis itself. The enmity or antithesis between the regenerate and unregenerate mind, as presaging the final antithesis of heaven and hell is renounced by the modern spirit in the hope that all the world might some day "live as one."

This erasing of the antithesis was the motivating theme and arousing sentiment of the song popularized by ex-Beatle John Lennon, in which he proposed, "Imagine there's no heaven; it's easy if you try, no hell below us, above us only sky. Imagine all the people living for today." The song went on to preach that we should imagine that there is no country, no possessions, and "no religion too" -- so that we might finally achieve a "brotherhood of man" where any and all antithesis, especially that proclaimed by the Bible, will be eliminated forever in a social, political, economical and religious monism of perpetual peace. It all begins, sings the modern siren, by imagining that there is no heaven and no hell. The God-ordained antithesis must not be conceded.

Even where the expression of the modern spirit is not as pronounced or poetic as John Lennon's song, we see the subtle disregard for the Biblical antithesis exhibited around us everyday in the media. The contemporary spirit is one of egalitarian democracy and enlightened tolerance, and these attributes are nothing if not meant to be all encompassing. It is not enough that political democracy permits one to believe as he sees fit; there is as well the "epistemological democracy" which insists that no belief-system is inherently superior to any other.

The Biblical antithesis between light and darkness, between God-honoring wisdom and God-defying foolishness, between the mind of the Spirit and the mind of the flesh is an offense to the modern mentality. Nobody has the warrant to deem his perspective as more authoritative or imbued with any special epistemological privilege over others. All philosophical points of view must be rendered equal honor as worthy of our attention and having something worthwhile to contribute to our thinking. We must respect each other.

Accordingly, our age is characterized by intellectual pluralism and the spirit of *rapprochement*, not at all by a recognition of, or a regard for, a categorical antithesis between Christian and non-Christian viewpoints.

The result of neglecting the God-ordained perspectival antithesis between Christianity and the world is, as one might naturally expect, a failure of nerve in maintaining any distinctive and unqualified religious truth, a truth which would stand out clearly against every view which falls short of it or runs counter to it. "Nobody is wrong if everybody is right" has become the unwitting operating premise of modern theology.

The cognitive agnosticism of post-Kantian religious thought precludes identifying any clear-cut line of demarcation between truth and error -- and renders the advocating of one a disreputable social faux pas'. Modern theology is, accordingly, simply loath to press the fundamental antithesis between scholarship which submits to the revealed word of God and autonomous reasoning which either ignores or denies it. The inevitable result of suppressing this antithesis is that Christian theology loses its basic character and joins hands with what should be its very opposite: religious relativism. That is what has transpired in our age of *anti-antithesis*. For instance, there are no genuine "heretics" in the thinking of modern theologians -- for the same reason there are no citations for indecent exposure in a nudist colony: viz., the preconditions for making those charges simply do not hold.

This is candidly illustrated by the text which I consider the most thorough and descriptively competent survey available for contemporary theology and philosophy of religion, one that was written by no less a scholar than the Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Oxford. In his book, *Twentieth Century Religious Thought*, John Macquarrie demonstrates a remarkable familiarity with the wide-ranging scope of philosophical trends which have interfaced with religious reflection since 1900.

Macquarrie has undoubtedly mastered the field of modern theological thought, and admittedly his insights and evaluations of particular themes or particular authors are often beneficial. But what has Macquarrie learned from all this? What conclusion would he draw from his study of twentieth-century religious thought? He is quite open about that matter in his chapter on "Concluding Comments" in the first subsection, entitled, "Some Findings and Suggestions." The Oxford scholar writes:

Our survey, however, has undoubtedly pointed us in the direction of a degree of relativism. Absolute and final truth on the questions of religion is just unattainable...Although absolute truth is denied us, we can have partial insights of varying degrees of adequacy, glimpses that would make us less forlorn...

What we are driving at is that just as we have no absolute answers, so we have no absolute questions, in which everything would be noticed at once. Only God could ask or answer such questions. Our questions arise out of our situation, and both questions and answers are relative to that situation. This need not distress us for it could not be otherwise -- it is part of what it means to be finite.

[We] have seen, there are many possible ways of understanding religion, and...no one way is likely to be the final truth...This is the situation in which finite man has got to make up his mind -- an agonizing situation, if you like but also a challenging and adventurous one. So Kierkegaard viewed Christianity -- not as a cozy convention but as a decision to be taken and a leap to be made.[\[7\]](#)

Macquarrie, who I think is representative of the modern mentality, is unwilling to countenance the radical antithesis (the God-imposed enmity) between belief grounded in God's holy Word and unbelief. At best he sees the theological situation as a "dialogue

"among free men" who, adrift together in religious relativism and uncertainty, must make an adventuresome "leap" of faith since there is no "final truth" regarding religion for us or finite creatures whose thinking is dependent upon our local situation. Of course, as Macquarrie recognizes, God himself might provide "absolute answers" which would lift us above our human limitations. And Macquarrie is well aware that, "some theologians talk of a divine revelation to which they have access," but then he promptly dismisses that "dogmatic and arrogant" perspective (due to difficulties connected with interpreting the revelation).

The farce in all this, I hope, is only too apparent. Macquarrie himself is no less dogmatic and arrogant in pronouncing that "absolute and final truth" on religious questions is "just unattainable." He is absolute in his declaration that nothing is absolute! On the question of religious insight, Macquarrie's own final truth is that there can be no final truth. This flagrant contradiction complements the subtle, but just as real, contradiction in his statement that "varying degrees of adequacy" can be recognized in different religious insights, despite the fact that "absolute truth" is denied us. When a final truth or religious standard is ruled out, on what basis could anyone judge the "degree" of approximation to the truth in any proposed religious idea? What kind of "adequacy" does Macquarrie expect religious insights to achieve, if not adequacy regarding their veracity? (Is it a religious truth that truth is irrelevant to religious adequacy?) The modern mind prefers such unpardonable lapses of intellectual cogency to the fearsome antithesis which an absolute divine revelation would represent and necessitate.

Dr. Van Til taught us that the tendency toward irrationalism in modern thought (the tendency toward skepticism, uncertainty, relativism, the acceptance of incoherence) is in fact allied with the tendency toward autonomous rationalism in modern thought (the tendency to exalt man's natural intellect as a final judge using the standards of logic and science). The reflective modern man wants it both ways: his intellect is adequate and authoritative, but not really adequate enough or finally authoritative. The arrogant demands of rationalism are counter-balanced by the humble concessions of irrationalism, and then the humble misgivings of irrationalism are shored up by the assurances of rationalism. Van Til pointed out that, ironically, the two tendencies toward rationalism and irrationalism actually call for each other:

There is nothing surprising in the fact that modern man is both utterly irrationalist and utterly rationalist at the same time. He has to be both in order to be either. And he has to be both in order to defend his basic assumption of his own freedom or ultimacy...The determinists and rationalists are what they are in the interest of defending the same autonomy of freedom of man that the indeterminists and rationalists are defending[8]

The non-Christian presupposes a dialectic between "chance" and "regularity," the former accounting for the origin of matter and life, the latter accounting for the current success of the scientific enterprise...The non-Christian...attempts nevertheless to use "logic" to destroy the Christian position. On the one hand, appealing to the *non-rationality* of "matter," he says that the chance-character of "facts" is conclusive evidence against the Christian position. Then, on the other hand, he maintains like Parmenides that the

Christian story cannot possibly be true. Man must be autonomous, "logic" must be legislative as to the field of "possibility," and possibility must be above God[\[9\]](#)

And this is precisely what we see in the example of Dr. Macquarrie. Leaning toward *irrationalism*, he rules out absolute or final truth in religion, affirms that all of our questions and answers are relative, says we must be content with a leap of faith, and settles for glaring contradictions in the course of telling us so. He then turns around on the very next page and asserts an autonomous *rationalism* as his intellectual guide: Our understanding of religion should be a *reasonable* one. By this is not meant that some conclusive proof is to be given, for we have already rejected the possibility of absolute certitude...In asking for a reasonable understanding of religion, we simply mean that it should involve no *sacrificium intellectus*, no flagrant contradictions, no violation of natural reason, no conflict with what we believe about the world on scientific or common-sense grounds.[\[10\]](#)

This conspicuous exhibition of the rational-irrational tension in the thinking of a learned, modern thinker is pertinent to our subject matter in this discussion, for we can discern here the *same suppression of antithesis* on both sides of Macquarrie's dialectic. On the *irrationalist* side, there can be no antithesis between divine truth and rebellious unbelief, for all religious insights are relative; all men are together in the same situation: a common dialogue where final and absolute truth is unattainable. Likewise, on the *rationalist* side of the dialectic, there can be no antithesis between divine truth and rebellious unbelief, for (again) all men are together in the same situation: refusing to sacrifice the autonomy of their "intellect," honoring the demands of "natural" reason and "common" sense, and never believing anything contrary to what "we" (any man) believe(s) about the world on the basis of (generic) "science." All men alike, whether servants or enemies of Jesus Christ, are lumped together by Macquarrie in his rationalist methodology (autonomous intellect is judge), even as they are lumped together in his irrationalist conclusion (there is no final truth). A fundamental religious antithesis in method and conclusion cannot be recognized by him.

A similar rejection of antithesis is found in the writings of one of the leading analytical philosophers of our age, Stephen Toulmin. In Toulmin's *The Return to Cosmology*, which addresses the interplay of science and the theology of nature, Toulmin argues, in the face of the modern antagonism to the idea, that questions of the universe as a whole and man's place in it should not be dismissed. Toulmin wants to return to comprehensive questions about the nature of the universe as a whole, to cosmological reflection which benefits from the dual input of natural science and religious philosophy.

At the very end of the book, where he discusses "The Future Cosmology," he makes the following observation: "If there is to be a renewal of contacts between science and theology along the lines suggested here -- if the cosmological presuppositions involved in talking about the overall scheme of things are to be scrutinized jointly from both sides of the fence -- we shall quickly encounter some knotty problems of jurisdiction."[\[11\]](#)

Toulmin is sharp enough to realize that "sectarian" disagreement and doctrinal particularism stand in the way of developing an effective, common cosmology in terms of which men can agree about their place and responsibility in the universe. The cosmology

whose pursuit he endorses, therefore, is one which will not offend "the natural reason" of man. In the second to last paragraph of his book he writes:

Yet does this put us in a position to claim, quite baldly, that the entire scheme of Creation by which our moral and religious ideas are to be guided is transparent to "the natural reason" without regard for the doctrinal considerations of particular religions and sects? Preachers who exhort good Christians to let their Christianity permeate all their thinking, so that they may even end up with (say a "Christian arithmetic") invite Leibniz's objection that arithmetic is just not like that -- even God himself cannot alter, or contravene, the truths of mathematics. And, if we were told that good Christians must subscribe to a different science of ecology from other people, a parallel objection might well be pressed. God intervenes in the World (Leibniz declared) within the realm of grace, not within the realm of nature. So perhaps the time has come to take our courage in both hands, and declare for a fully common and ecumenical theology of nature.[\[12\]](#) Toulmin is willing to return to cosmological thinking, *just so long* as any antithesis between a Christian theology of nature and any non-Christian conception is ruled out in advance. The Christian perspective is to be confined to the realm of grace, not allowed to create sectarian disputes within the realm of nature. The last thing that the modern mind is willing to accept is a distinctively Christian mathematics, a distinctively Christian natural science, a distinctively Christian anything. No special place may be afforded the Christian perspective. "The antithesis" must be removed if Christians are to dialogue with other religionists, philosophers, or scientists. Everyone must be respected for having a perspective which contributes to the rich understanding of this ultimately mysterious universe.

Toulmin immediately states that his fully ecumenical enterprise -- what he calls a "theology of nature accessible to the common reason" will not bring universal support due to the intolerance of "fundamentalist theology." But, even if it did, if all perspectives would accept the rationalist requirement of a common, autonomous intellectual method, would Toulmin's ecumenical theology of nature prove successful? Would it bring us an assured knowledge of the grand scheme of things and man's place in the universe? In the very last paragraph of his book, Toulmin asks, "Just how far, then, can the natural reason alone inform us in detail about what the overall scheme of things -- the cosmos, or Creation -- really is?" His answer (or non-answer) ends the book: "We have reached the threshold of some painfully difficult and confusing questions, but answering them is a task for the future."[\[13\]](#)

Toulmin, the philosopher, has thus returned -- along with the theologian Macquarrie -- to the irrationalist modern tendency toward uncertainty and skepticism. The questions are so tough that nobody can really know for sure. The substitute for a distinctively Christian answer turns out to be, as always, the eschatological cop-out invoked by autonomous thought: answering the ultimate questions must ever remain a task for the *future*.

The modern repudiation of the antithesis between the regenerate and unregenerate minds, between the Christian worldview and its competitors, is itself (ironically) a reiteration of that very antithesis. Macquarrie's promotion of religious relativism and Toulmin's

rejection of any distinctively Christian cosmology both take their stand over against the Christ speaking in the Scriptures. Contrary to the thesis proclaimed by Christ, the modern man asserts its anti-thesis. The God-ordained "enmity" between belief and unbelief (cf. [Genesis 3:15](#)) cannot ever be successfully overcome. In its effort to supplant it, unbelieving scholarship simply ends up supporting it.

However, that such a vain effort to eliminate antithesis between Biblical Christianity and its opponents is made by worldly scholars should come as no surprise. After all, respect for, and condoning of, that antithesis would be implicitly self-condemning. [John 3:20](#) tells us that it is precisely an escape from God's condemnation which unbelievers seek.

The remarkable thing is that even professedly "Christian" scholars would likewise make the vain effort to eliminate the antithesis between Biblical philosophy and unbiblical speculation.

The penchant of modern theologians and churchmen to ignore the inherent antagonism between the perspective of God's holy word and the perspectives developed by men who suppress or dispute Biblical truth agonized Van Til to the depth of his God-fearing soul. By stressing commonality rather than conflict, such theologians surely find themselves more pleasing to men, said Van Til, but they do so at the price of coming under the displeasure of God -- the God who, in the garden of Eden, Himself imposed the inescapable enmity between His people and the world.

Thus in *The Great Debate Today*, Van Til eschewed the lead of liberal and neo-orthodox pundits in order to follow Augustine, teaching that the "City of God" and the "city of man" stand over against one another in their total outlook with respect to the whole course of history. In the *Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought*,[\[14\]](#) Van Til argued against the apostate and man centered ecumenism of contemporary speculation -- an ecumenism which, to be consistent, must acknowledge that even the radically anti-Christian proposals of Teilhard de Chardin and the God-is-dead proponents (about whom, see Van Til's analyses in separate pamphlets from 1966), should not be kept out of the church (cf. *Toward a Reformed Apologetics*). In books such as *The Sovereignty of Grace*[\[15\]](#) and *The New Hermeneutic*,[\[16\]](#) Van Til warned against the synthesis between Christianity and post-Kantian thought which is the dangerous drift in the teaching of the later Berkouwer and Kuitert.

We cannot help but notice, then, that the message of antithesis is disregarded by worldly thinkers and theologians of perspectival synthesis. However, the one who above all wishes to see a dissolving of the antithesis of regenerate and unregenerate thinking in favor of synthesis, ecumenism, and a "common faith" of an autonomous or humanistic character is the one upon whom that antithesis was originally pronounced as a curse -- Satan himself (cf. [Genesis 3:14-15](#)). This is, in fact, his most effective tool against the redemptive plan of God and the maturation of the Messiah's kingdom. This is his "last, best hope" that the gates of hell might after all prevail against the church of Christ (cf. [Matt. 16:18](#)), for according to philosophical reflection which disregards the antithesis between the "two seeds," there is in principle no necessity for a fundamental clash

between the church and hell's gates anyway. Satan gladly works through the polemics of autonomous philosophers and relativistic, ecumenical theologians to badger or tempt God's people to compromise "the antithesis" in their reasoning and scholarship, and he would especially have us lay aside any theoretical or practical application of the fact that the unbeliever's "enmity" against God and His people comes to expression precisely in his intellectual life or thinking. Satan does so just because the Bible's message of redemption, as well as the historical work of Christ and His Spirit in establishing God's kingdom, both presuppose a powerful, systematically basic and intrinsic antithesis between the cultures of regenerate and unregenerate men.

[At this point in the original lecture, Dr. Bahnsen enters into an extended critique of Francis Schaeffer's notion of antithesis. Bahnsen argues that "one might think, then, that we would welcome any Christian scholar or writer who makes the summons back to antithesis central to his encounter with modern culture. But, this is not entirely the case. In a rather odd way, some conceptions of the antithesis can unwittingly, but, nevertheless, truly work to undermine the very antithesis which is presented in and essential to the Biblical viewpoint...this is what we find the case of Francis Schaeffer's apologetical work and writings."

Moreover, Bahnsen argues, Schaeffer not only offers a false conception of antithesis, but he also seriously misconstrues the nature and importance of the philosophy of Hegel. Schaeffer embarrassingly imputes various blatantly "unHegelian" views to Hegel. Christian scholarship must rise above this sort of mistake. *Antithesis* will publish Dr. Bahnsen's important critique of Schaeffer in its June/July issue (Vol. I, No.3, 1990).]

3. The Systematic Nature of Antithesis

In terms of theoretical principle and eventual outworking, the unbeliever opposes the Christian faith with a whole antithetical *system* of thought, not simply with piecemeal criticisms. His attack is aimed, not at random points of Christian teaching, but at the very foundation of Christian thinking. The particular criticisms which are utilized by an unbeliever rest upon his basic, key assumptions which unify and inform all of his thinking. And it is this presuppositional root which the apologist must aim to eradicate, if his defense of the faith is to be truly effective.

Abraham Kuyper well understood that all men conduct their reasoning and their thinking in terms of an ultimate controlling principle -- a most basic presupposition. For the unbeliever, this is a natural or naturalistic principle, in terms of which man's thinking is taken to be intelligible without recourse to God. For the believer, it is a supernatural principle based on God's involvement in man's history and experience, notably in regeneration -- perspective that provides the framework necessary for making sense of anything. These two ultimate commitments -- call them naturalism and Christian supernaturalism -- are logically incompatible and seek to cancel each other out. They must, as Kuyper argued in *Principles of Sacred Theology*, create "two kinds of science," where each perspective (in principle) contradicts whatever the other perspective says and denies to it the noble name of "science."[\[17\]](#) The natural principle develops its science,

and the supernatural principle develops its science -- and the two will not honor each other as being genuine sciences. And thus the unbeliever is bent on distorting, reinterpreting, or rejecting any evidence or argumentation which is set forth in support of, or which is controlled by, the believer's ultimate commitment. To be consistent, the unbeliever cannot even allow for the *possibility* that the Christian proclamation is true.

There are two fundamentally different worldviews in terms of which men conduct their thinking and in terms of which they understand the use of reason itself.

Let's just take that word "reason" for a moment. In the generic sense "reason" simply refers to man's intellectual or mental capacity. Christians believe in reason, and non-Christians believe in reason; they both believe in man's intellectual capacity. However, for each one, his view of reason and his use of reason is controlled by the worldview within which reason operates. A worldview is, very simply, a network of presuppositions which is not verified by the procedures of natural science, but in terms of which every aspect of man's knowledge and experience is interpreted and interrelated.

The unbeliever's worldview, according to Kuyper, is characterized by being autonomous. That is, it is characterized by self-sufficiency or an independence from outside authority, especially any transcendent authority (one that originates beyond man's temporal experience or exceeds man's temporal experience). The autonomous man, as Van Til puts it, wants to be "a law unto himself." And this leads, then, to what our society calls, "secularism" or "humanism:" the view that man is the highest value, as well as the highest authority, in terms of knowledge and behavior, rather than some transcendent reality or transcendent revelation. Rationalism is humanistic or autonomous in its basic character, maintaining the general attitude that man's autonomous reason is his final authority -- in which case divine revelation may be denied or ignored in *whatever* area a person is studying.

4. Antithesis in Apologetic Method

Now because the unbeliever has such an implicit system of thought or worldview -- an autonomous, rationalistic, secular worldview -- directing his attack on the faith, the Christian can never be satisfied to defend the hope that is in him by merely stringing together isolated evidences which offer a slight probability of the Bible's veracity. Each particular item of evidence -- whether it is historical evidence as John Warwick Montgomery wants to present, or logical evidence as Alvin Plantinga wants to present, or existential evidence like Francis Schaeffer was very adept at presenting -- each particular item of evidence will be evaluated by the unbeliever (as to both its truthfulness and its degree of probability) *by that unbeliever's tacit assumptions*. His general world-and-life-view will provide the context in which the evidential claim is understood and weighed.

For this reason the apologetical strategy that we see illustrated in Scripture calls for argumentation at the *presuppositional* level. When all is said and done, it is worldviews that we need to be arguing about, not simply evidences or experiences. When Paul stood before Agrippa and offered his defense for the hope that was in him, he declared the

public fact of Christ's resurrection. We see that in [Acts 26:2,6-7](#). There is no doubt that Paul was adamant to proclaim the public fact of the resurrection of Christ: "for the King knows of these things unto whom also I speak freely; for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him, for this has not been done in the corner" (v.26). However, what you must make note of is the presuppositional groundwork and context which Paul provided for his appeal to fact. The *very first point* Paul endeavored to make in his defense of the faith was not an observational truth about what was a public fact, but rather a *pre-observational* point (something that preceded observation and is not based on observation) -- a transcendental matter (about what is *possible*). Thus we read in verse eight: "Why is it judged *impossible* with you that God should raise the dead?" Paul wanted to deal first of all with the question of pre-observational worldview -- what is possible and what is impossible -- and in terms of that he dealt with the historical fact of Christ's resurrection.

God was taken as the sovereign determiner of what can and what cannot happen in history. Paul then proceeded to explain that the termination of hostility to the message of the resurrection requires not that we consult more eyewitnesses, but rather requires submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ (vv.9,15). "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth..." [later] "I said, Who art thou Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecuteth." There was an antithesis that Jesus sovereignly overcame in Paul's life. The unbeliever, like Paul, must understand who the genuine and ultimate authority is: It is Jesus whom the unbeliever would persecute. Paul went on to explain that the message he declared called for a "radical change of mind." That is, etymologically, what *metanoeo* means -- the changing, the turning around of, the mind -- turning from darkness to true light, from the domination of Satan to God, as Paul says in verses 18-20. The unbeliever must renounce his antagonistic reasoning and embrace a new *system* of thought. His mind must be turned around, and thus his presuppositional commitments must be altered.

Finally we notice that Paul placed his appeal to the fact of the resurrection within the context of Scripture's authority to pronounce and interpret what happens in history, verses 22-23: "Having therefore obtained the help that is from God I stand unto this day testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses did say should come: how that the Christ must suffer, and that He first by the resurrection of the dead should proclaim light both to the people and the Gentiles." In verse 27, Paul says, "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets?"

Paul's apologetic did not deal with just isolated evidences. He dealt with transcendental matters (what is possible), with ultimate authority ("it is Jesus you are persecuting"), with Scripture, ("don't you believe the prophets?"). The ultimate ground of the Christian certainty and the authority that backs up his argumentation must be the Word of God. Paul could go to the facts then, but only in terms of an undergirding *philosophy of fact* and in accordance with the foundational presuppositions of a Biblical epistemology.

We see that most clearly when Paul went to Athens and there met the learned unbelievers of his day -- the philosophers in the capital city of philosophy, Athens. On Mars hill,

(actually before the Areopagus council, I believe) Paul defended his Christian faith, as we read in [Acts 17](#). We must make special note of what [Acts 17](#) says. Paul pressed the antithesis, and Luke draws that to our attention.

[Acts 17:16](#) tells us that Paul was provoked at the idolatry of that city. The citizens who heard the disputation of Paul disdained him as an intellectual scavenger, some sort of pseudo philosopher (v. 18). They called him a "seed picker," someone who just stands around and picks up scraps here and there. "This man is no *real* philosopher." And so as verse 32 tells us, in the end they mocked him. Here is Paul provoked at idolatry. Here are the idolators mocking Paul. This does not look like commonality; it looks like conflict. We need to see that Paul did not bring with him common philosophical perspectives that he shared with Plato and Aristotle, or more particularly with the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers. Rather, *they* saw him as bringing something "new" and something "strange," (vv. 19, 20). It was just because they saw a *difference* with Paul that he was scrutinized by the Areopagus council.

When Paul appeared before the council he did not ask the philosophers to simply add a bit more information to their systems. He rather challenged the controlling presuppositions of those very systems. And as verse 30 says, he ended by calling them (as he did Agrippa) to "repentance," to a change of mind, not just to the supplementation of what they already believed.

Paul recognized their strange religiosity, their "superstitious" ways (as verse 22 puts it). In verse 23 admittedly Paul says, "you worship what you admit is unknown." Over against this, Paul set forth his ability to declare the divine truth against their ignorance. Consider verse 23 in [Acts 17](#). Paul put this very antithetically: "what therefore you worship in ignorance, this I set before you," -- i.e., what you don't know about, I have the ability, I have the position and the authority to declare to you. And when you look at what Paul said to the Areopagus council, if you have any knowledge of ancient Greek philosophy (especially that of the Stoics and Epicureans) you will notice that virtually everything Paul said stands over against the philosophical themes and premises of these schools of thought.

But now someone will say, nevertheless, that it is in this particular apologetical encounter where we see Paul explicitly making *common cause* with the philosophers because in verses 27 and 28 he cites them in favor of the Christian message! In [Acts 17:27](#), speaking of all men seeking God (or that they should seek God if aptly they might feel after Him and find Him) Paul says "though He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move and have our being *as certain even of your own poets have said*; we are also His offspring." Doesn't Paul then make common cause with the Greek philosophers at this particular point?

What Paul actually says in these verses though is that men will try to seek God, "if perhaps they might feel after Him." The subordinate clause that is used in that particular verse expresses an unlikely contingency; it's not likely that they are going to seek after God. Indeed Paul tells us in [Rom 3](#) that "there is none that seek God; they have all turned

aside and become unprofitable." But even *if* they should seek after God, Paul says that what they do is "grop" or feel after Him. The Greek word that is used is the same word used by Homer for the groping around of the blinded cyclops. Plato used that word for what he called amateur guesses at the truth. Paul says, even if men might seek after God, their groping in darkness, their amateur guesses, give no authority to what they are doing. And so far from showing what Lightfoot thought was a clear appreciation of the elements of truth contained in their philosophy, at Athens Paul taught that the eyes of the unbeliever are *blinded* to the light of God's revelation. As he says in [Rom 1](#), unbelievers have a knowledge of God, but it's one that they *suppress*, thereby meriting God's condemnation. Commenting on this, the earlier Berkouwer, writes: "The antithesis looms larger in every encounter with heathendom. It is directed, however, against the maligning that heathendom does to the revealed truth of God in nature, and it calls for conversion to the revelation of God in Christ."[\[18\]](#)

Then in verse 27, Paul explains that this inept groping of the unbeliever is not due to any deficiency in God -- not due to any deficiency in God's revelation. Verse 28 begins with the word "for." It is offering a clarification, an illustration, of the statement that God is quite near at hand, even for blinded, pagan thinkers. If perhaps they might grope after Him, Paul says, God is not far from any one of us. And how do you know that? Well, you see, *even pagans* like yourselves are able to say things which are formally true.

The strange idea that these quotations of the pagan philosophers stand as proof, in the same way as Biblical quotations do for Paul elsewhere in Acts, is not only contrary to Paul's decided emphasis in his theology upon the unique authority of God's Word, but it simply will not comport with the context of the Areopagus address, where the groping, unrepentant ignorance of pagan religiosity is forcefully declared.

Paul was quoting the pagan writers *not* to enlist their support, not to make common cause with them, but *to manifest their guilt*. Since God is near at hand for all men, his revelation impinges on them continually, and they can't escape the knowledge of Him as their Creator and as their Sustainer. And what Paul says is that even your philosophers know this. Even pantheistic Stoics are aware of, and obliquely express, God's nearness and man's dependence upon Him. And so Paul quotes Epimenides and Aretus (who himself was repeating Cleanthes' hymn to Zeus).

Knowing the historical and philosophical context in which Paul spoke, and noting the polemical thrusts of the Areopagus address, we can not accept any interpreter's hasty pronouncement to the effect that Paul "cites these teachings with approval unqualified by allusion to a totally different frame of reference." That is what Gordon Lewis says, arguing against Van Til's understanding of [Acts 17](#).[\[19\]](#) Those who make these remarks eventually are forced to acknowledge the qualification anyway. Lewis goes on to say that Paul is not commanding their Stoic doctrine and did not reduce his categories to theirs. I think Berkouwer is correct here, when he says "There is no hint here of a point of contact, in the sense of a preparation for grace, as though the Athenians were already on the way to true knowledge of God."[\[20\]](#)

Berkouwer says of Paul's quotation of the Stoics:

This is to be explained only in connection with the fact that the heathen poets have distorted the truth of God...Without this truth there would be no false religiousness. The should not be confessed with the idea that false religion contains *elements* of the truth and gets its strength from those elements. This kind of quantitative analysis neglects the nature of the distortion carried on by false religion. Pseudo religion witnesses to the truth of God in its apostasy.[\[21\]](#)

Surely Paul was not committing the logical fallacy of equivocation, by using pantheistically conceived premises to support a Biblically conceived theistic conclusion. Rather Paul appealed to the distorted teaching of the pagan authors as evidence that the process of theological distortion cannot fully rid men of their natural knowledge of God. Certain expressions of the pagans thus manifest this knowledge of God, but manifest it *as suppressed* -- as distorted. Ned B. Stonehouse in his excellent discussion of the Areopagus address, observed:

The apostle Paul, reflecting upon their creaturehood, and their religious faith and practice, could discover within their pagan religiosity evidences that the pagan poets in the very act of suppressing and perverting the truth presupposed a measure of awareness of it.[\[22\]](#)

And so their own statements unwittingly convicted the pagan philosophers of the knowledge of God, the knowledge they suppressed in unrighteousness. About these pagan quotations, Van Til observed:

They could say this adventitiously only. That is, that it would be in accord with what they deep down in their hearts knew to be true in spite of their systems. It was that truth which they sought to cover up by means of their professed systems, which enabled them to discover truth as philosophers and scientists.[\[23\]](#)

Men are engulfed by the revelation of God. Try as they may, the truth which they possess in their heart of hearts cannot be escaped, and it will inadvertently come to expression. They do not explicitly understand it properly (to be sure), and yet those expressions are a witness to their inward conviction and their culpability. Consequently, Paul could take advantage of pagan quotations, *not* as an agreed upon ground for erecting the message of the gospel, but as a basis for calling unbelievers to *repentance* for their flight from God.

In [I Corinthians 1:17](#), Paul says, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel; not in the wisdom of words lest the cross of Christ should be made void." Paul says that to use the unbeliever's worldly wisdom -- the wisdom of words in his apologetic -- would be to *make void* the word of the cross. This is a very strong statement. Paul says he cannot make common cause with worldly wisdom because, to the degree that he does the cross of Christ is emptied of its meaning.

In [II Corinthians 11:3](#) Paul wrote "But I fear lest by any means as the serpent beguiled Eve in his craftiness, your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity and purity that is toward Christ." Paul wanted us to have our minds free from corruption. He wanted us to be pure toward Christ, to have a simple devotion to Him and not (like Eve) to be deceived by the serpent. We are not to put our authority above the authority of God's Word or challenge it.

Paul, as we have seen above then, could use facts or evidences in his apologetic. He could quote unbelieving philosophers. But he never lost sight of the presuppositional antithesis in defending the faith. The apologist needs to recognize that because of "the antithesis," the debate between believer and unbeliever is fundamentally a dispute or clash between two complete world views, between ultimate commitments and assumptions which are contrary to each other. An unbeliever is not simply an unbeliever at separate points; his antagonism is rooted in an overall "philosophy" of life. (As Paul says in [Colossians 2:18](#), "beware lest any man take you captive through his philosophy.") Two philosophies or two systems of thought are in collision with each other. One submits to the authority of God's word as a matter of presuppositional commitment; one does not. The debate between the two perspectives will eventually work down to the level of one's ultimate authority. The presuppositional apologist realizes that every argument chain must end, and must end in a *self-authenticating* starting point. If the starting point is not self-authenticating, the chain just goes on and on. Every worldview has its unquestioned and its unquestionable assumptions, its primitive commitments. Religious debate is always a question of ultimate authority.

What is the apologetical method that results from these observations? It will be contrary to that method which we see in men like John Warwick Montgomery, Gordon Clark, or even Francis Schaeffer. When worldviews collide the truly presuppositional and antithetical approach will involve two steps. It will involve first of all an internal critique of the unbeliever's philosophical system, demonstrating that his outlook really is masking a foolish destruction of knowledge. And then, secondly, it will call for a humble, yet bold, presentation of the reason for the believer's presuppositional commitment to God's Word. We see this illustrated in [Proverbs 26:4-5](#). "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own conceit." Show the fool his folly -- where his thinking leads -- so he does not think he has anything going for him, "lest he be wise in his own eyes." And then as Proverbs says, "Don't answer a fool according to his folly, lest you be like unto him," lest you end up in the same situation of destroying all possibility of knowledge. In the apologist's case: lest you be like the fool, don't answer him according to his folly, foolish presuppositions, but answer him according to your own revealed presuppositions and outlook. Such a procedure can resolve the tension, the debate, the antithesis, between competing authorities and conflicting starting points because it asks, in essence, which position provides the preconditions for observation in science, for reasoning and logic, for absolutes in ethics, and for meaningful discourse between the believer and the unbeliever. The presuppositional approach is basically a setting out of the preconditions of intelligibility for all human thinking.

In *Toward a Reformed Apologetic*, Van Til puts it this way:

In seeking to follow the example of Paul, Reformed Apologetics needs, above all else, to make clear from the beginning that it is challenging the wisdom of the natural man on the authority of the self-attesting Christ speaking in Scripture. Doing this the Reformed apologist must place himself on the position of his "opponent," the natural man, in order to show him that on the presupposition of human autonomy human predication cannot even get underway. The fact that it has gotten underway is because the universe is what

the Christian, on the authority of Christ, knows it to be. Even to negate Christ, those who hate him must be borne up by Him.[\[24\]](#)

The Christian, by placing himself on the unbeliever's position can show how it results then in the destruction of intelligible experience and rational thought. The unbeliever must be unmasked of his pretensions. Paul challenges "where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" ([I Corinthians 1:18-20](#)). The unbeliever must be shown that he has "no apologetic" for his viewpoint ([Rom 1:20](#)). In [Rom 1:20](#), Paul says that unbelievers are left "without excuse," but etymologically one could actually translate it into English that "they are without an apologetic." They have no defense of the position they have taken. Non-believers are left, as Paul says in [Ephesians 4:17-24](#), with vain, darkened, ignorant minds that need renewal. The Christian should then teach the unbeliever that all wisdom and knowledge must take Jesus Christ as its reference point ([Colossians 2:3](#)) -- that Jesus Christ is the self-validating starting point of all knowledge. Christian apologists should press the antithesis in debating with unbelievers.

5. Unbelievers Eventually at War With the Word

Jesus, of course, categorically claimed to be the truth, "I am the way, *the truth* and the life" ([John 14:6](#)). John himself reveals Christ as the very word, the logos, of God ([John 1:1](#)). And thus Jesus, who categorically claims to be the truth, Jesus who is the very word and logos of God, becomes the starting point, the self-vindicating foundation of the Christian's worldview and reasoning. Due to the antithesis between the believer and unbeliever, all unbelieving reasoning must then take its stand in opposition to the *Word* of God and to the *truth* of God. To put it briefly, the unbeliever must be "at war with the Word."

The unbeliever's enmity against the Word of God is not narrowly a religious matter. Sometimes I think we understand this enmity as though the unbeliever just does not like the religious idea of Jesus being the Son of God and our Saviour. But far more, the unbeliever's enmity entails opposition to the very *worldview* which is the context and foundation of any particular, Biblical message or applications. Now since only the Christian worldview makes *language* and *rationality* (logic) intelligible, unbelievers will be led, if they are consistent, to oppose language and rationality themselves in order to oppose the Christian worldview which alone sustains their intelligibility and possibility.

To put it somewhat by way of pun, the unbeliever's war with the Word (that is to say, their war with Scripture and Christ) will lead them to be at war with the word -- all human language and meaning. Because they reject the transcendent Word of God, Jesus, who is the very Truth of God, they are led in the immanent domain to reject the idea of the word, meaning, truth, and logic as well. This is just what we see, for instance, in the modern, literary Deconstructionist movement.

[At this point in the original lecture, Dr. Bahnsen turns to criticize the contemporary literary/philosophical movement known as Deconstructionism. Dr. Bahnsen uses contemporary Deconstructionism as a primary example of the non-Christian "war against

the Word." Since Deconstructionists reject the transcendent Word of God, they are led to war against the immanent "word" -- all human language and meaning. Jacques Derrida and his disciples do this by attempting to display the radical indeterminacy of linguistic meaning due to the putative absence of any objective norms, universals, or Truth. Dr. Bahnsen argues that Deconstructionism fails to meet its claims and is self-defeating. Deconstructionism, nevertheless, is valuable in that it can be used to demonstrate the failure of non-Christian viewpoints in general.]

Conclusion

The conclusion I wish to draw from this discussion is that the "antithetical" nature of Christianity calls for a *presuppositional* method of defending the faith. According to Dr. Van Til, "the antithesis" revealed in the Bible must be pressed with unbelievers in order to guard Christianity's *uniqueness*, *exclusivity*, and *indispensability*.

First of all, the antithesis must be pressed to guard Christianity's uniqueness. Christ cannot be presented to men as simply another Bodhisattva, another Avatar. He cannot be absorbed into a larger philosophical coherence with other religions.

Secondly, Christianity must not be presented to men as just a general axiom. It is rather an historical particular. Christianity deals with a specific individual, the Christ of history who did particular things at a particular time. It is not just a philosophy understood in the idealist sense. [John 14:6](#) tells us that there is no other way to God. [Acts 4:12](#) tells us that there is no other name under Heaven whereby we must be saved. In *Toward a Reformed Apologetic* Van Til says:

Romanism and Arminianism have, to some extent, adjusted the gospel of the sovereign grace of God, so as to make it please sinful man in his would-be independence of God. Romanism and Arminianism have a defective theology. Accordingly, they also adjust their method of reasoning with men so as to make it please sinful men. They also have a defective apologetic. They tell the natural men that he has the right idea about himself, the world and God so far as it goes, but that he needs some *additional* information about these subjects.[\[25\]](#)

What Van Til is getting at is that our task is not to show that Christianity does justice to rationality and to the facts. Van Til says that Christianity alone saves rationality and the facts. It is not simply *better* than the non-Christian view, it is the the *only* option available to a rational man. And for that reason the apologist does not need the autonomous man's "favors." In *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel*, Van Til declares:

Instead of accepting the favors of modern man, as Romanism and Arminianism do, we should challenge the wisdom of this world. It must be shown to be utterly destructive of predication in any field. It has frequently been shown to be such. It is beyond the possibility of the mind of man to bind together the ideas of pure determinism and of pure indeterminism and by means of that combination to give meaning to life.[\[26\]](#)

To put it briefly, Van Til says do not allow your apologetic to be absorbed into a larger coherence. Rather present it *antithetically* -- as the only way that any coherence can be saved.

Thirdly, Van Til wanted to guard Christianity's indispensability. Christianity does not need to satisfy autonomous man's test of logic and facts. It does not need to bow before the authority of the autonomous mind of men. In *Toward a Reformed Apologetic*, he says:

Romanism and Arminianism try to show Christianity can meet the requirements of the natural man with respect to logic and fact...The rational man must be told that it is not he that must judge Christ but it is Christ who judges him.[\[27\]](#)

And he is told that when the natural man has it explained to him, that when he goes to war with the Word of God, he goes to war with the word of man as well. In *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel*, Van Til uses these stirring words:

The implication of all this for Christian apologetics is plain. There can be no appeasement between those who presuppose in all their thought the sovereign God and those who presuppose in all their thought the would-be sovereign man. There can be no other point of contact between them than that of head-on collision.[\[28\]](#)

So, if we are true to the *antithetical* nature of Christianity, we must engage in a presuppositional challenge to unbelievers to show them that in terms of their worldview they cannot make sense of logic, facts, meaning, value, ethics or human significance.

An objection is sometimes raised that if you press the antithesis, then you will scuttle communication. Interestingly, only presuppositional argumentation can actually handle the antithesis. If someone thought that the antithesis really undermined apologetical argumentation, then he would face the choice of (1) denying the antithesis which the Bible so clearly presents, or (2) giving up apologetics altogether.

But *does* the antithesis scuttle apologetics? Kuyper thought it did. Kuyper clearly saw the antithesis and recognized that because of it there would be the development of *two* sciences or cultures. But from that fact he drew the fallacious conclusion that Christian apologetics was useless. He states in *Principles of Sacred Theology*, that "It will be impossible to settle the difference of insight. No polemic between these two kinds of science...can ever serve any purpose. This is the reason why apologetics has always failed to reach results."[\[29\]](#)

This conclusion does not follow, however, when other equally Biblical insights are taken into account. For instance, the unbeliever's *intention* may be to follow his naturalistic principle consistently. He may claim to be doing so. But to do so in practice is actually not possible. He cannot escape the persuasive power of God's revelation around and within him. Indeed, by the common grace of the Holy Spirit, he is restrained from successfully obliterating the testimony of God. And so, he ends up conducting his life and reasoning in terms of God's revelation, since there is no other way for man to learn and make sense of the truth about him or the world. He does that, all the while, verbally denying it, and convincing himself that it is not so.

In *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til writes, "I am unable to follow [Kuyper] when from the fact of the mutually destructive character of the two principles he concludes to uselessness of reasoning with natural man."[\[30\]](#) Van Til says the spiritually dead man cannot in principle even count and weigh and measure. Van Til says that unbelievers

cannot even do math or the simplest operations in science. By that he means the unbeliever's espoused *worldview* or philosophy cannot make counting or measuring *intelligible*. Now why is that? Briefly, because counting involves an abstract concept of law, or universal, or order. If there is no law, if there is no universal, if there is no order, then there is no sequential counting. But the postulation of an abstract universal order contradicts the unbeliever's view of the universe as a random or chance realm of material particulars. Counting calls for abstract entities which are in fact uniform and orderly. The unbeliever says the world is not abstract -- but that the world is only material; the universe is not uniform, but is a chance realm and random. And so by rejecting God's word -- which account for a universal order or law -- the unbeliever would not *in principle* be able to count and measure things. As it is, believers do in fact count and do in fact measure and practice science, but they cannot give a philosophical explanation of that fact. Or as Van Til loved to put it: unbelievers can count, but they cannot *account* for counting.

In light of these concerns, the antithesis we have been discussing is not an insurmountable impediment to apologetical argumentation. It is, *ironically*, what makes successful apologetics *possible*! Not only is the apologist able to mount a compelling argument against the cogency of the unbeliever's espoused philosophy and the adequacy of his interpretation of the facts, but the unbeliever can also be expected to understand and feel the force of the apologist's reasoning. Apologetical argument -- intellectual reasoning which goes beyond mere testimony -- must not therefore be disparaged or ignored by those of us who honor the antithesis. It must not be reduced to a futile effort made vain by the perspectival antithesis between the regenerate and the unregenerate.

Van Til says that Christianity must be presented to men as the *objective* truth -- objective because it has a public nature. That is the common ground between us, believer and unbeliever: the truth that is objectively, publicly there. It is true independent of our feelings; it is true independent of anyone's belief. We must present the gospel as objective truth and *provable* true. Warfield was right in that regard. It is not only a moral lapse, but it is also an unjustifiable, intellectual error to reject the message of God's revealed Word. Because of the antithetical nature of Christianity, only a presuppositional method of argument is able to press home that transcendental challenge with consistency and clarity (arguing from the philosophical impossibility of the contrary position).

The approach to apologetics which gives us piece-meal evidences (e.g. John Warwick Montgomery), or the approach to apologetics which gives us pragmatic, personal appeals (e.g. Francis Schaeffer) or the approach to apologetics which begins with voluntaristic, fideistic axioms (e.g. Gordon Clark) do not adequately deal with the antithesis -- thus with Christianity's indispensability for making sense of rational thought, history, science, or human personality. It is not a matter of whether we should choose between those approaches and the presuppositionalist approach. Given the fact of antithesis, the only approach that will be usable is the presuppositional one. The situational perspective advanced by Montgomery and the existential perspective advanced by Schaeffer cannot compete with the *normative* apologetical approach of Cornelius Van Til. Only that perspective challenges the unbeliever with Christianity's indispensability.

Van Til wrote at the end of *Toward a Reformed Apologetic*:

Finally, it is my hope for the future, as it has always been my hope in the past, that I may present Christ without compromise to men who are dead in trespasses and sins, that they might have life and that they might worship and serve the Creator more than the creature...Rather than wedding Christianity to the philosophies of Aristotle or Kant, we must openly challenge the apostate philosophic constructions of men by which they seek to suppress the truth about God, themselves, and the world.[\[31\]](#)

Van Til says we are children of the King. To us, not to the world, do all things belong. It is only if we demand of men *complete submission* to the living Christ of the Scriptures in every area of their lives that we have presented to them the claims of the Lord Christ without compromise. In short, we must not synthesize Christ's words with unbelieving philosophies, but rather present Him antithetically in apologetics. Only then do we do so *without compromise*.

Notes

- [1] Van Til, Cornelius, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* [Originally "Metaphysics of Apologetics,"] (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1969), v.
- [2] (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1946), p. 364.
- [3] (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1947), p.3.
- [4] (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1955), pp. 319ff.
- [5] Geehan, E.R., *Jerusalem and Athens*, (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1955), pp. 20,21.
- [6] (n.p., n.d.) pp. 24-28.
- [7] (London:SCM Press, rev. 1971) pp. 372,373.
- [8] Van Til, C., *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel*, (New Jersey: L.J. Grotenhuis, 1953) p. 17.
- [9] Geehan, pp. 19,20.
- [10] Macquarrie, p. 373.
- [11] (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1982), p.273.
- [12] Toulmin, p.274.
- [13]

- ibid.* p.274.
- [14] (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1955)
- [15] (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1969)
- [16] (New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co., 1974)
- [17] Kuyper, A., *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968 [1898]), pp. 150-156.
- [18] Berkouwer, G.C., *General Revelation*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p.145.
- [19] "Mission to the Athenians," Part IV, Seminary Service, (Denver: Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary, 1964), p.7.
- [20] Berkouwer, p. 143.
- [21] *ibid.* p.144.
- [22] Stonehouse, N.B., *Paul Before the Areopagus and Other New Testament Studies*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 30.
- [23] Van Til, C., *Paul at Athens*, (Phillipsburg : L. J. Grotenhuis, n.d.) p. 12.
- [24] Van Til, *Reformed Apologetic*, p. 20.
- [25] *ibid.* p.3.
- [26] Van Til, *Intellectual Challenge*, p.40.
- [27] Van Til, *Reformed Apologetic*, p.6, 7.
- [28] Van Til, *Intellectual Challenge*, p.19.
- [29] Kuyper, *Principles*, p. 160.
- [30] Van Til, *Defense*, p.363.
- [31] Van Til, *Reformed Apologetic*, p. 28.

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