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CORNELIUS VAN TIL AND ROMANS 1:18-21

A STUDY IN THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF PRESUPPOSITIONAL APOLOGETICS

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Should the Christian attempt to prove the existence of God to the unbeliever? Many apologists would answer in the positive, at least in some cases. However, Van Til says "no." It is his view, admittedly developed by presupposing the truth of the Bible, that the unbeliever is somehow already aware, in the deep recesses of his heart, that God exists. Van Til develops this argument regarding the sensus deitatis (sense of deity) largely from Rom 1:18-21. This study seeks first to summarize some of the relevant features of Van Til's epistemology. Then a brief exegesis of relevant features of Rom 1:18-21 follows, with the conclusion that Van Til is mainly correct. In evangelism and apologetics the Christian should not attempt to prove the existence of God to the unbeliever. The unbeliever, if he is honest with himself, knows this already. The Christian should proclaim the gospel, God's appointed dynamic for turning the lost to himself.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

VAN Til's presuppositional apologetic differs radically from traditional apologetics (whether empirical, rationalistic, or a combination of both.) Viewing the Scriptures as self-authenticating, he assumes their truth. The following extended quotation well summarizes his basic position:

I take what the Bible says about God and his relation to the universe as unquestionably true on its own authority. The Bible requires men to believe that he exists apart from and above the world and that he by his plan controls whatever takes place in the world. Everything in the created universe therefore displays the fact that it is controlled by God, that it is what it is by virtue of the place that it

occupies in the plan of God. The objective evidence for the existence of God and of the comprehensive governance of the world by God is therefore so plain that he who runs may read. Men cannot get away from this evidence. They see it round about them. They see it within them. Their own constitution so clearly evinces the facts of God's creation of them and control over them that there is no man who can possibly escape observing it. If he is self-conscious at all he is also God-conscious. No matter how men may try they cannot hide from themselves the fact of their own createdness. Whether men engage in inductive study with respect to the facts of nature about them or engage in analysis of their own self-consciousness they are always face to face with God their maker.¹

In Van Til's view, God is the logical reference point for all predication. Man in Eden, created in God's image, was to think God's thoughts after him. Fallen man, however, suppresses his knowledge of God even though he still is aware of God's existence. Regenerate man has been given again the capacity to think God's thoughts after him. Thus for Van Til apologetics is largely an appeal to the image of God in man, which image includes an ineradicable *sensus deitatis* (sense of deity).²

All this, to say the least, is rejected by traditional apologists, who appeal primarily to man's rational capacities or to his sense perceptions. Men who fit in this category believe that Van Til has begged the apologetic question; his defense of the faith has left the faith defenseless.³ In this view Van Til is essentially a fideist, one who requires men to believe in God apart from any evidence.⁴ Van Til's response to this is in substance the claim that his position squares with the biblical doctrines of common grace, general revelation, and man's inherent yet suppressed knowledge of God. Van Til's appeal is then not merely to man's rational or sensory capacities, which in his view are seriously impaired by the fall. Instead, Van Til appeals to the inner sense of deity which man's fallen mind suppresses.⁵ Important

¹Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (3rd ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967) 195.

²Cornelius Van Til, *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 6, 140, 151.

³Gordon R. Lewis, "Van Til and Carnell—Part I," *Jerusalem and Athens* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 359-61; and *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 144-48.

⁴Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 56-58. For a concise and cogent answer to the charges of men like Lewis and Geisler, see James M. Grier, Jr., "The Apologetical Value of the Self-Witness of Scripture," *GTJ* (1980) 71-76. See also John C. Whitcomb, Jr.'s, four-part series "Contemporary Apologetics and the Christian Faith," which appeared in *BSac* beginning with 134:534 (April, 1977).

⁵For a convenient outline where Van Til compares and contrasts his own position with that of traditional apologetics, see "My Credo," *Jerusalem and Athens*, 18-21.

Scripture passages for Van Til's argument include Genesis 3, Acts 14 and 17, 1 Corinthians 2, Ephesians 2 and 4, and especially Romans 1-2.

As one reads the works of Van Til, however, he realizes that biblical exegesis is not Van Til's forte. He is usually content merely to quote from English versions without attention to the original languages.⁶ In reply to G. C. Berkouwer, Van Til admits this problem:

I agree that my little book on *The Sovereignty of Grace* should have had much more exegesis in it than it has. This is a defect. The lack of detailed scriptural exegesis is a lack in all my writings. I have no excuse for this.⁷

This problem underlines the need for this study. It cannot be doubted that Rom 1:18-21 is a major passage for Van Til's apologetic method. Yet he nowhere gives a detailed exegesis of the passage. Thus it seems imperative for presuppositional apologetics to determine whether he has correctly understood this vital passage.

This brief study centers first upon an overview of some salient features of Van Til's epistemology. Then some key exegetical factors in Rom 1:18-21 are touched upon.

AN OVERVIEW OF SOME RELEVANT FEATURES OF VAN TIL'S EPISTEMOLOGY

According to one source, epistemology is "the theory of knowledge . . . that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its presuppositions and basis, and the general reliability of claims to knowledge."⁸ Van Til's works emphasize epistemology, especially his *Christian Theory of Knowledge*.

Analogical thought

Basic to Van Til's epistemology is the concept of analogical thought, grounded upon the distinction between God as Creator and

⁶But see "Apologetics" (syllabus, Westminster Theological Seminary, n.d.) 43-44; *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, vol. 5 of *In Defense of Biblical Christianity* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 93; *Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 245, 264, 308; and *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953) 6.

⁷*Jerusalem and Athens*, 203. Van Til further states that he has been aware of traditional reformed exegesis and wishes he had included more of it in his writings. He adds that he hopes his readers will do their own exegesis. A former student of Van Til, Prof. James M. Grier, Jr., of Cedarville College, related that Van Til usually referred his students to the exegesis of his colleagues John Murray, Ned Stonehouse, and E. J. Young. Murray and Van Til do differ on some features of Romans 1, however, as will be shown later in this study.

⁸D. W. Hamlyn, "Epistemology, History of," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Paul Edwards; 8 vols.; New York Macmillan, 1967), 3. 9-10.

man as creature. God is original, absolute, and infinite while man is derived, limited, and finite. Man, created in God's image, was responsible to think analogically God's thoughts after him. In this way, man was to interpret God's universe, with the aid of God's preinterpretation, special revelation. To prove this concept Van Til relies upon Genesis 1-3 where God by special revelation interpreted the earth (general revelation) for man and then charged man to be submissive to this revelational interpretation. God's knowledge then is comprehensive and analytical, while man's knowledge is limited and analogical, yet genuine.

The system that Christians seek to obtain may . . . be said to be *analogical*. . . . *God has absolute self-contained system within himself. . . . But man, as God's creature, cannot have a replica of that system of God. . . . He must . . . in seeking to form his own system, constantly be subject to the authority of God's system to the extent that this system is revealed to him.*

For this reason all of man's interpretations in any field are subject to the Scriptures given him. Scripture informs us that, at the beginning of history, before man had sinned, he was subject to the direct revelation of God in all the interpretations that he would make of his environment.⁹

Van Til's concept of analogical knowledge occasioned a dispute with Gordon Clark.¹⁰ Clark seems to hold that knowledge must be univocal and comprehensive in order to be genuine, and he charges that Van Til's system leads to skepticism since in it man cannot know truth but only an analogy of the truth. In response, Van Til charges that Clark's univocal scheme obliterates the Creator-creature distinction and denies the incomprehensibility of God. In Van Til's view, "we know the world truly . . . though not comprehensively."¹¹

The bearing of this on Rom 1:18ff. must now be explained. In Van Til's view, this passage affirms that men knew God, yet chose to serve the creature rather than the Creator, all the while suppressing their inner knowledge of God. Van Til sees in this a rebellion against

⁹*Christian Theory of Knowledge*, 16; cf. *The Defense of the Faith*, 31-50; and "Apologetics," 9-11.

¹⁰Gordon H. Clark, "The Bible as Truth" *BSac* 114 (1957) 157-70; and "Apologetics," *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (ed. by C. F. H. Henry; Great Neck, NY: Channel, 1957) 159.

¹¹*The Defense of the Faith*, 43. For further discussion of this question, see Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 98-105, and Gilbert B. Weaver, "The Concepts of Truth in the Apologetics Systems of Gordon Haddon Clark and Cornelius Van Til" (unpublished Th.D dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1967) *passim*. Reymond favors Clark's approach and Weaver argues that Van Til is correct.

the Creator-creature distinction and a setting up of human autonomy in the place of special revelation as the ultimate reference point for understanding the universe. Van Til's solution involves believers submitting once again to God's special revelation in order to interpret reality properly. "Man's interpretation must always be re-interpretation. Men cannot get at reality at all except via the interpretation of God. . . . The fact that it is re-interpretation of God's original makes our interpretation valid."¹²

Three types of epistemological consciousness

A second basic feature of Van Til's epistemology is his conception of three types of consciousness. Based squarely upon his Creator-creature distinction, Van Til posits (1) Adamic consciousness, (2) unregenerate consciousness, and (3) regenerate consciousness.¹³ By "Adamic consciousness" he refers to Adam's prefall submission to revelation when he *receptively reconstructed* and reinterpreted God's system. "Unregenerate consciousness" refers to man's mistaken and futile attempt to create his own autonomous system (*creative construction*) in total disregard of God's revelation. "Regenerate consciousness" refers to the believer's thought as it is being restored to Adamic consciousness, i.e., once again reinterpreting reality in submission to revelation (cf. Eph 4:20-24). It should be added here that Van Til's position would not deny a common created self-consciousness for all men.

At this juncture, it is imperative to insert a qualifier. Van Til is quick to point out that both unregenerate and regenerate men may in *practice* be respectively better or worse than they are in *principle*. Thus the unregenerate man is often in practice not as bad as he could be in principle, and the regenerate man is often, sad to say, not as good in practice as he should be in principle. Here Paul's "old man" vs. "new man" motif is employed in a novel fashion. Just as the believer's "old man" hinders him in his quest for submission to God,¹⁴ so the unbeliever's old man (his God-likeness and *sensus deitatis*) hinders him in his quest for autonomy. In Van Til's own words,

¹² *Psychology of Religion*, vol. 4 of *In Defense of Biblical Christianity* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 53.

¹³ See *The Defense of the Faith*, 48-50; *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 25-30; and *Christian Theistic Ethics*, vol. 3 of *In Defense of Biblical Christianity* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977) 20-24.

¹⁴ The writer is aware of the division among exegetes on the old man vs. new man motif (Rom 6:5; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:9-10.) Van Til seems to agree with those who hold that this motif contrasts the old and new in the believer. There are others, however, who hold that the old man is the unregenerate man and the new man is the regenerate man. Even if one does not agree with Van Til's terminology, it must still be recognized

It is the new man in Christ Jesus who is the true man. But this new man in every concrete instance finds that he has an old man within him which wars within his members and represses the working out of the principles of his true new man. Similarly it may be said that the non-believer has his new man. It is that man which in the fall declared independence of God, seeking to be his own reference point. . . . But as in the new man of the Christian the new man of the unbeliever finds within himself an old man warring in his members against his will. It is the sense of deity, the knowledge of creaturehood and of responsibility to his Creator and Judge. . . . Now the covenant breaker never fully succeeds in this life in suppressing the old man he has within him. . . . That is the reason for his doing the relatively good though in his heart, in his new man, he is wholly evil. So then the situation is always mixed. In anyone's statement of personal philosophy there will always be remnants of his old man. In the case of the Christian this keeps him from being consistently Christian in his philosophy of life and in his practice. In the case of the non-believer this keeps him from being fully Satanic in his opposition to God.¹⁵

Rom 1:18ff. is obviously relevant to this point in Van Til's position. Man seems to be viewed by Paul as suppressing (1:18) his knowledge (1:21, 28, 32) of God in his futile quest for autonomy. Thus the unbeliever's "old man," his awareness of the Creator and the created universe, hinders his "new man" in its vain attempt to gain wisdom apart from God (1:22).

Conclusion

The starting point of Van Til's system is the triune God who has infallibly revealed himself in self-attesting Scripture. Without this foundation, neither the law of contradiction nor man's sensory perception would be intelligible. Man is not viewed as an impartial seeker after truth who can be convinced of God's existence by probability arguments from reason or experience. Instead, man is viewed as a rebel against God who nonetheless in his innermost being still recognizes his Master. Therefore the point of contact in apologetics and evangelism¹⁶ is the unbeliever's "old man," his awareness of

that the believer still has the capacity to sin. For an able discussion of this question with a defense of the latter view, see John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 211-19.

¹⁵See Van Til's "Introduction" in B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948) 24; and also his "Nature and Scripture" in *The Infallible Word* (3rd rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967) 282.

¹⁶Van Til has been criticized for joining apologetics and evangelism by Frederic R. Howe, "Kerygma and Apologia," *Jerusalem and Athens*, 445-52. Van Til's response to

God and God's universe which he possesses since he was created in God's image. Natural revelation is authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous to the natural man,¹⁷ but he is guilty of suppressing its testimony and of not interpreting it conjointly with special (supernatural) revelation.

EXEGETICAL NOTES ON ROM 1:18-21 WITH EVALUATION
OF VAN TIL'S POSITION

This section does not purport to be an exhaustive exegesis of this passage. However, it will expose certain issues in these verses which are of crucial import to Van Til particularly and to Christian apologetics generally. Van Til's position will be evaluated from an exegetical perspective.

Argument of the passage

The general argument of Rom 1:18-32 seems to have three movements. First, Paul relates the revelation of God's wrath (1:18). Second, he explains the reasons for God's wrath, namely, that men have suppressed and spurned God's self-revelation in nature. They idolatrously worship the creation—not the Creator (1:19-23). Third, Paul shows the results of God's wrath (1:24-32). God's judgment on man's idolatry includes delivering men over to impurity (24-25), homosexuality (26-27), and radical depravity (28-32). As a whole, then, this section of the epistle emphasizes a present continuing revelation of God's wrath (*ἀποκαλύπτεται*, 1:18), which is to be identified with God's delivering men over (*παρέδωκεν*, 1:24, 26, 28) to sin. The point of Paul's argument is not that these sins could lead to God's wrath in the future. On the contrary, these sins indicate that God's wrath is already being poured out. "In other words, sexual rebellion, license, and anarchy is the retributive judgment of God."¹⁸

More specifically, the argument of 1:18-21 seems to be built upon the conjunctions *γὰρ* (18, 20) and *διότι* (19, 21). Salvation by faith and the revelation of the righteousness of God (1:16-17) are of utmost importance *because* (*γὰρ*) the wrath of God is also being revealed (1:18). The wrath of God is being revealed *because* (*διότι*)

Howe is that no "sharp distinction" between apologetics and evangelism is justified from Scripture. In Van Til's view, the "defense of the truth of Christianity is . . . always, at the same time, a witness to Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (*ibid.*, 452).

¹⁷"Nature and Scripture," 272-83.

¹⁸S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "God Gave Them Up: A Study in Divine Retribution," *BSac* 129 (1972) 130.

men have not responded to the revelation of God clearly present in nature (1:19). 1:20 seems to be largely exegetical of 1:19; the γὰρ should probably be understood as explanatory ("indeed"). Men are without excuse (1:20c) *because* (διότι) they did not glorify God even though they knew him (1:21a).

Romans 1:18

In Rom 1:18 the meaning of κατεχόντων is crucial. The verb κατέχω has two legitimate ideas in the NT, "to hold fast" and "to hold down."¹⁹ The basic question here is whether Paul simply states that the unsaved "hold" (= "possess, have," AV) the truth or "suppress" (= "hinder, hold down," NIV, NASB) it. Reputable scholars may be found on both sides of the question.²⁰ The second alternative seems to fit the contextual argument much better. However, the two possibilities are complementary, not contradictory. If the unsaved possess the truth in an unrighteous state, they are actually suppressing it. Likewise, the suppression of truth seems to presuppose the possession of it.

For Van Til, κατεχόντων definitely refers to suppression. When one scans Van Til's works he finds many different "translations" of the word, including "hold, hold back, hold down, hold under, keep under, keep down, hinder, resist, repress, and suppress." The unsaved man in Van Til's view constantly fights the losing battle of establishing human autonomy in spite of the *sensus deitatis* within. The suggestion of Cranfield, that κατεχόντων is merely conative, fits in well with Van Til's understanding.²¹ Although the unsaved *attempt* to obliterate the truth, it is inherent in their very beings. This attempt "is always bound in the end to prove futile."²²

¹⁹See BAGD, 422-23, for a detailed discussion.

²⁰Those who view κατεχόντων as *possession* include G. Abbott-Smith, *Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (3rd ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937) 241, following J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (reprinted; Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, n.d.) 251. See also R. St. John Parry, ed., *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans (CGT; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1912) 43-44*. However, most exegetical commentaries view κατεχόντων as *suppression*. See, for example, C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Romans (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 1. 112*; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) 34. Against both of the above is the translation "laying claim" advocated by F. W. Danker in "Under Contract," *Festschrift to Honor F. Wilbur Gingrich* (ed. E. H. Barth and R. E. Cocroft; Leiden: Brill, 1972) 93.

²¹*Commentary on Romans, 1. 112.*

²²*Ibid.*

Romans 1:19

Two features of 1:19 are relevant to this discussion. The first of these concerns the meaning of the phrase τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ. Does this phrase refer to actual or merely potential knowledge? In other words, is there a real sense in which unsaved men know God, or is Paul simply saying that God is "knowable"? This second view has the support of many well-known scholars.²³ However, H. G. Liddon's statement is hard to disprove: "The phrase . . . must, according to the invariable New Testament and LXX use, mean *that which is known* not *that which may be known about God*."²⁴

For Van Til the unsaved man really knows God. God is revealed clearly through both nature and conscience. While Van Til would admit that nature's revelation of God is limited in scope (cf. 1:20), he would still insist that man actually knows this God. While γνωστός may have a potential meaning in Classical Greek,²⁵ it seems best in light of both NT usage and the context to understand it as a reference to a real yet suppressed knowledge. There is no warrant here to speak of a potential knowledge of God to be gained by probability argumentation. Paul is certainly not attempting a "cosmological argument." Rather, he is speaking of an actual knowledge of God obtained from nature. Man suppresses this limited knowledge and thus becomes "without excuse" (1:20).

The second feature of 1:19 which deserves treatment here is the meaning of the prepositional phrase ἐν αὐτοῖς. Three views have been suggested, each of which is *grammatically* possible: (1) God is manifest *within* each man's conscience²⁶ (2) God is manifest *among* men

²³Ibid., 113; William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902) 42; E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (London: John Murray, 1886) 62. BAGD (164) translates "what can be known about God or God, to the extent that he can be known." Similarly, R. Bultmann, "γινώσκω," *TDNT* 1 (1974) 718-19, understands it "God in his knowability."

²⁴H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (London: Longmans, Green, 1899) 26. See also H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans* trans. by J. C. Moore and E. Johnson; rev. and ed. by W. P. Dickson; New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884) 57; R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961) 95-96; and Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (reprinted; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 36. It should be noted that even if γνώστον means "knowable" the context seems to require not only that God is "knowable" but that he is actually "known." That is why the suppression takes place.

²⁵LSJ 355.

²⁶Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 42; Gifford, *Romans*, 62; Liddon, *Romans*, 25; Meyer, *Romans*, 57; and Charles M. Horne, "Toward a Biblical Apologetic," *Grace Journal* 2:2 (1961) 15.

collectively,²⁷ and (3) God is manifest *to* men (= simple dative of indirect object αὐτοῖς, 1:19b).²⁸

Obviously, view 1 would be most in harmony with Van Til's position on the *sensus deitatis*. The strongest objection to this, however, is that the context emphasizes objective external revelation, not an internal individual subjective apprehension of that revelation.²⁹ There may be some force to this objection, but it should be noted that the context of Romans 1 does include the idea of a subjective apprehension of the revelation in nature (cf. γνωστόν, 1:19; γνόοντες, 1:21; ἐπιγνώσει, 1:28; and ἐπιγνόντες, 1:32). How else could it be truly said that men "suppress" the truth (1:18)? Even if view 2 or 3 is favored, though, Van Til's position is not necessarily denied.

Romans 1:20

While much time could be spent on the attributes of God mentioned in 1:20 (δύναμις καὶ θεϊότης), two other considerations are more specifically relevant to this study. The first of these concerns the meaning of the prepositional phrase ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου. Scholars are divided over the question of a temporal ("since") or source ("from") connotation. It could be argued that the source idea is more natural to the preposition's meaning,³⁰ but the temporal use is also clearly demonstrable.³¹ Thus the question is whether this phrase refers to the source of the revelation of God's invisible attributes or to the time when these attributes began to be revealed in this way.

Neither of these two possibilities present a problem to Van Til's apologetic. The temporal view is much to be preferred, however, since the source or means of the revelation is already expressed by τοῖς ποιήμασιν (1:20).³² Thus, the temporal view avoids a tautology. God's natural revelation, then, began at the time of the creation of the universe, but even during the pre-fall period, God's direct verbal revelation interpreted this natural revelation to Adam.

²⁷Cranfield, *Romans*, 1. 113-14.

²⁸John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1. 37-38.

²⁹Cranfield, *Romans*, 1. 114; Murray, *Romans*, 1. 37-38.

³⁰Gifford, *Romans*, 63, 70.

³¹BAGD, 87; J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901) 58; Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 42-43; Cranfield, *Romans*, 1. 114; and Murray, *Romans*, 1. 39.

³²Nigel Turner views this as a probable instrumental dative. See his *Syntax*, vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* by J. H. Moulton (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 240.

A second noteworthy feature of 1:20 is the meaning of the verb καθορᾶται. With τὰ ὄρατα this verb forms a striking oxymoron.³³ The verb καθορᾶω is a compound form in which κατὰ intensifies ὄρᾶω. The meaning is “perceive” or “notice” and can be rendered here with the modal participle νοούμενα, “perceived with the eye of reason.”³⁴ Cranfield, holding that subjective mental perception is precluded, argues that merely *physical* sight is in view.³⁵

For Van Til, the clarity or perspicuity of natural revelation is an important factor. It is his position that the theistic proofs (Aquinas’s “five ways,”³⁶ etc.) seriously compromise this clarity, since, as they are popularly formulated, they do not take into account the *sensus deitatis* and are content merely with *probable* conclusions as to God’s existence. Van Til’s position seems to be vindicated by the verb καθορᾶται. The unsaved are viewed as clearly perceiving God’s invisible attributes even as they simultaneously suppress this knowledge. Van Til is correct, then, in maintaining that the theistic proofs as normally formulated are self-defeating. If men already know God exists, it is a mistake to attempt to prove it to them in the usual ways. The usual approach caters to man’s desire for autonomy and does not take into account the *sensus deitatis* or the clarity of natural revelation. To reason with a supposedly neutral unsaved mind concerning the possibility of God’s existence totally ignores Paul’s thrust in this context.

Romans 1:21

Only one phrase in Rom 1:21 will be discussed, the adverbial participle γνόντες τὸν θεὸν. Since it is aorist, it could involve action either prior to or simultaneous with that of the main verbs ἐδόξασαν,

³³Murray, *Romans*, 1. 38. For another mind-boggling oxymoron see Eph 1:19.

³⁴BAGD 391. Thayer, *Lexicon*, 314 translates the verb “to see thoroughly, perceive clearly, understand.” W. Michaelis views νοούμενα as a simultaneous modal participle describing a mental process, “ὄρᾶω,” *TDNT* 5. 380.

³⁵*Romans*, 1. 115. Similarly, Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 43, mention that the κατὰ prefix may be directive, resulting in the meaning “survey or contemplate.”

³⁶St. Thomas Aquinas, *Existence and Nature of God*, vol. 2 of *Summa Theologiae*, ed. T. McDermott (60 vols.; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 13-17 (Question 2, art. 3). Aquinas interpreted Rom 1:18ff. as indicating men *could* come to know about God’s existence by their natural powers of reasoning. Van Til, on the other hand, says that men already know God and use their rational capacities to suppress this knowledge. G. Bornkamm is certainly correct in pointing out that Paul here emphasizes natural revelation as a basis for judgment, not as a basis for a theoretical understanding of God. See his “Faith and Reason in Paul’s Epistles,” *NTS* 4 (1958) 96-97. It is difficult to understand the position of J. J. O’Rourke, who admits that Paul is speaking about

ἠὺχαρίστησαν, ἐματαιώθησαν, and ἐσκοτίσθη. Cranfield opts for prior action "since their experience of God has necessarily always gone before their failure to recognize its true significance and act accordingly."³⁷ It would also seem true, however, that their failure to interpret their experience of God properly occurs even *while* they are aware of his being and existence. Perhaps the participle has a concessive force here.³⁸ The sense would then be that even though they knew God (as Paul shows in 1:18-20), they still refused to glorify or thank him.

This understanding can be supported in the context of 1:21. Suppression of truth (1:18) requires a degree of knowledge about it, and 1:19-20 speak of the extent of this knowledge (being expegetical to 1:18). The vanity and darkening of the mind in 1:21 and the activities described in the ensuing verses all assume man's knowledge of truth. Especially noteworthy in this regard is 1:28, where the men are portrayed as not liking to have God in their knowledge (ἐπιγνώσει), resulting in the judicial punishment of an ἀδόκιμον νοῦν. In the culminating indictment of the chapter, 1:32, yet another reference is made to the fact that they knew God's righteous standards (τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπιγνόντες).

With the words "There are no atheists, least of all in the hereafter,"³⁹ Van Til expresses his conviction that all men know God in the utmost depths of their beings. Paradoxically, though, men do not *want* to know God, and may claim to be atheists. Thus, the same person is in a sense both a theist and an atheist. Only the grace of God in Christ can create in such a person a true saving knowledge of the Godhead.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A vitally important issue in apologetics today is the distinction between natural revelation and natural theology. While it is certain that God has revealed himself in nature, it is unbiblical to assert that man responds positively to natural revelation. On the contrary, man suppresses this knowledge, rebels against it, and is therefore judicially abandoned by God. Rom 1:18ff. must not be understood as a cosmological argument for the probability of God's existence. Such

an actual possession of knowledge about God but then implies that man obtains that knowledge via the use of Aquinas's five ways. This view involves a positive response to natural revelation, which is contrary to Paul's emphasis in this passage. See O'Rourke's "Romans 1:20 and Natural Revelation," *CBQ* 23 (1961) 303-4.

³⁷ *Romans*, 1. 116n.

³⁸ H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1955) 227. See also Barrett, *Romans*, 36; NASB.

³⁹ *The Defense of the Faith*, 153.

an apologetic must be rejected.⁴⁰ The common ground between believers and unbelievers lies not in a supposed common epistemology but in a common bearing of God's image.⁴¹ This metaphysical common ground, involving as it does the *sensus deitatis*, becomes the proper point of contact in apologetics and evangelism. Men are accessible to the gospel because they are God's image-bearers and live in God's universe which constantly testifies to them of God.⁴² Here is the true genius of the apologetic method of Cornelius Van Til. Let everyone who proclaims the gospel of Christ consider Van Til's emphasis.

Two areas of further study seem to be suggested by this study. First, it has been noted above that there is some question as to whether Van Til has overemphasized the *sensus deitatis* in Romans 1. Even John Murray had reservations in this area.⁴³ This suggests the need for a study of 2:1-16 (especially 2:14-15) and a correlation of its emphasis with that of 1:18ff.

A broader area which needs further investigation is the tension between natural theology and natural revelation. Cranfield, for example, in his desire to avoid the former, is reticent to accept the

⁴⁰See the critique of "natural theology" in G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 148-53. Berkouwer concludes that "only by distinguishing between general revelation and natural theology can we do justice to the message of Scripture" (153). See also Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. by C. C. Rasmussen; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949) 102-9; and M. D. Hooker "Adam in Romans 1," *NTS* 6 (1960) 299-300.

⁴¹Evidential apologetics relies upon a supposed epistemological common ground between believers and unbelievers. From this perspective comes J. W. Montgomery's parable of the Shadoks and the Gibis, which originally appeared in *Jerusalem and Athens*, pp. 383-88, and has recently been republished without change in *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 107-28. Montgomery concludes that presuppositionalism (which he labels fideism) results in an impasse—there is no point of contact between the mythical Shadoks and Gibis, who diverge radically in their respective world-views. However, Montgomery has neglected the truth of Rom 1 that men at bottom know God. As Jim S. Halsey states, "Montgomery's engrossing parable of the Shadoks and the Gibis fails as a valid critique of Van Til's apologetic for it assumes that each race . . . has been created as a metaphysical blank. In other words, the parable ignores the central and crucial fact that both the Shadoks and the Gibis know the truth from the outset of their respective existences. The difference between the two (Christian and non-Christian) occurs at the point of epistemological interpretation." See Halsey's *For a Time Such as This: An Introduction to the Reformed Apologetic of Cornelius Van Til* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 78.

⁴²In his stimulating study, "The Scope of Natural Revelation in Romans 1 and Acts 17," *NTS* 5 (1959) 133-43, H. P. Owen states "Paul would . . . seem to imply that the knowledge gained by natural revelation (either in an actual and recognized, or in a potential and unrecognized form) constitutes a 'point of contact' for the gospel" (142).

⁴³Murray, *Romans*, I. 37-38.

latter. He does not grant that men *subjectively* know God through natural revelation. In his view men know God

. . . in the sense that in their awareness of the created world it is of him that all along, though unwittingly, they have been—objectively—aware. They have in fact experienced him . . . though they have not recognized him. . . . It is in this limited sense they have known him all their lives.⁴⁴

It has been previously argued that Paul's language in Rom 1:18ff requires more of an awareness of God than Cranfield allows. Perhaps Cranfield's motive is to relieve the paradox which Van Til's position sets up. Cranfield emphasizes man's estrangement from God to the detriment of natural revelation. However, Van Til emphasizes man's estrangement from God as rebellion against his own conscience and surrounding environment. Here followers of Van Til should be warned by Cranfield not to stress the *sensus deitatis* without a balancing stress upon man's suppression of truth, rebellion against truth, and judicial abandonment to radical depravity.

⁴⁴Romans, I. 116-17.