

A Letter to Francis Schaeffer

[Cornelius Van Til](#)

March 11, 1969

Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer
Chalet les Melezes
Huemoz sur Ollon
1861 Switzerland

Dear Francis:

You remember that some time ago I sent you a copy of a memorandum that I wrote on your *Wheaton Lectures*. Now that your book *The God Who Is There* appeared I should like to make some further remarks.

Let me preface what I say, by repeating what I said in the memorandum, that I have the greatest admiration for you personally and for your work at L'Abri. Those who have been with you there speak in the most glowing terms about what you accomplish with modern intellectuals.

Let me, to begin with, stress the fact that I think we both have essentially the same goal before us in our work. We are seeking to have modern man, in particular modern educated young men and women, accept Jesus Christ as he speaks to us with absolute and infallible authority in the original languages of the Old and New Testament as the Savior and Lord.

Moreover, I think we agree that the biblical gospel of sovereign, saving grace, which modern man needs, is best reproduced in the Reformed Confessions. When the Westminster Confession speaks of God as "alone and unto himself all-sufficient" and as "the alone fountain of being" it is speaking of the triune God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost (Clyst 2) of which the Scripture speaks. It is this triune God of Scripture who is there. It is this God who has created the world and who is, accordingly, manifest in the world. The works of creation and of providence are the works of this God. He who does not recognize the presence and all-

controlling activity of this God in nature and in history therefore, in a basic sense, misinterprets all the facts with which he deals in any way.

I think you will agree, then, that no form of natural theology has ever spoken properly of the God who is there. None of the great Greek philosophers, like Plato and Aristotle, and none the great modern philosophers, like Descartes, Kant, Hegel or Kierkegaard and others, have ever spoken of the God who is there. The systems of thought of these men represent a repression of the revelation of the God who is there.

Again, we know that man has been created in the image of this triune God. Every man is therefore confronted with the revelation of the triune God within his own constitution as well as by the facts of his environment. Man cannot turn on any button on the dial of his self-consciousness but he will see the face of this God who is there. The triune God of Scripture who is there is everywhere there and is everywhere unescapably there.

We know this fact that the God who is there is everywhere and unescapably there because he has told us this in the Scripture. He has spoken to us in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of the trinity. Jesus tells us that he is one with the Father. By directing the Apostles of Christ the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity, has given us the Scriptures. From the Scriptures, as the word of the triune God, we learn what he has done in relation to man. At the beginning of history he established a covenant with man. By obeying the command of God man would attain eternal life. By disobeying he would reap eternal death.

Man disobeyed. As a consequence he, and the whole created universe with him, rests under the curse of God. The wrath of God is since the fall of man revealed from heaven. The God who is there is everywhere and unescapably there to covenant-breaking, sinful man as the God who punishes all iniquity upon all men. To be sure, God restrains his wrath. He gives men rain and sunshine and fruitful seasons. He calls all men to repentance through the good gifts that he gives them. But so long as they do not repent they remain under his wrath. This fact, as Calvin puts it, all men ought to see because it is there clearly to be seen. Every form of evil, physical as well as moral, is, in the final analysis, a consequence of human sin. However, no man has, from a study of himself and of the facts of nature by means of observation and ratiocination, ever come to the conclusion that he is a creature of God and that he is a sinner in the sight of God, who, unless he repents, abides under the wrath of God. The "natural man" assumes that he can and must interpret himself and the facts of the universe without any reference to the God who is actually there. The "natural man" assumes that the

facts of the space-time world are not what Christ, speaking for the triune God, says they are. For the natural man the facts are just there. They are contingent, i.e. not preinterpreted by God.

The "natural man" assumes that there is a "principle of rationality," including the laws of logic, i.e. the law of identity, the law of excluded middle and the law of contradiction which is, like the "facts," just there. The facts he speaks of he assumes to be non-created facts. There is no "curse" that rests upon nature because of man's sin. The "natural man" assumes that he himself, being 'just there,' can relate the space-time facts which are 'just there' by means of a "principle of rationality" that is 'just there' to one another or that if he cannot do this, no one can. It does not occur to him to think of God as the one whose thoughts are higher than his thoughts. How do I, as a Christian, know all this information about the "natural man." Christ tells me this in Scripture. Moreover, the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit gives me life from the dead so that I understand this not merely in intellectual fashion but existentially, I have been born again unto knowledge. Once I am born again I know that I am a creature made in the image of God. I now know that together with all men I became a sinner, a covenant-breaker, subject to the wrath of God. I now know that Christ died to redeem me from the curse that rested upon me for my disobedience of the law of God and that in him I am now justified. I now that I am, together with the body of the redeemed, on the way to my Savior's presence. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism I am now persuaded that "I belong, not to myself, but to my faithful Savior and that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair shall fall from my head." Everything in the I-It dimension as well as everything in the I-thou dimension is unified by means of the all-directing control of Jesus Christ, the Savior of his people. The city of God will be victorious over the city of men. The powers of hell cannot prevent the victory of the work of the triune God for the salvation of the world.

It is now my task, assigned to me by my Savior, to beseech all men everywhere to be reconciled to God. It is now my task as a simple believer to witness as a simple believer by word of mouth and by my life to simple unbelievers. I must tell men plainly and simply that things are much worse with them than they themselves assume them to be. To my simple unbelieving neighbor I must be like the doctor. When the doctor comes, I tell my neighbor, he does not ask you, as the patient, to diagnose the nature of your disease. The doctor may ask you, I say to my neighbor, where it hurts. But for all that, the doctor himself makes the diagnosis of your distress.

The diagnosis is that you have a disease that will lead to death. You are on the staircase that leads downward to eternal separation from the love of God. You are on this staircase, not because the world, reality, just happened to be built that way but because you, with all other men, hate the triune God, the creator-redeemer of men. God calls you to repentance. Rom 2 You have spurned and continue to spurn his call. You deserve to go to hell.

Am I better than you? Not in the least! I too was in the way of death, til God reached down to change my inmost disposition. The triune God reached down in grace to me. He gave me life! I was dead in trespasses and sins. I hated God. I was helpless in my hatred of God. I could not because I would not and I would not because I could not love God and my neighbor.

Now that I know God or rather am known of God, now that I have been, as Paul says, born again unto knowledge, now I can look back and see the nature of sin from which I have been saved. Only now that I live do I understand something of the nature of the death from which I have been rescued.

I now know that I ought to have seen that the triune God of Scripture is everywhere operative in the world. The triune God is plainly present everywhere. But I, together with all other men, had taken out my eyes. After that I needed not only new light, the light of the grace of God's redeeming work in history, but also a new power of light. "But natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14).

It is thus, when I speak as a simple believer to my neighbor, a simple unbeliever, that I plead with him to give up his futile, hopeless opposition to the pleading, threatening voice of God. My Lord and my Savior commands me, and in that command gives me the great privelege, of thus speaking to my neighbor. "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Following the example as well as the command of my Savior, I present the universal offer of salvation to all men everywhere, so far as my voice and life can reach. I know that Jesus also said: "No one comes to me except the Father draw him." I know that my argument, however forceful and valid it may be, cannot, as such, bring men to know the truth. I know that at the beginning man was created as the image-bearer of God and as such as possessing true freedom. But I know also that this freedom of man did not consist in an ability to beyond or independently of the all controlling purposes of the triune God. Man as a creature is free within the plan of God; man become a sinful creature is still "free" within the plan of God. He is free to sin, and therefore free to be a "slave to sin."

Without the presupposition of the sovereign disposition of all things, whether in the I-it or in the I-thou dimension, there would be no freedom for man and no meaning for history.

Having said this much about my simple, unbelieving neighbor I turn to my sophisticated friends. Here you have the advantage over me. You converse constantly with modern artists, modern existentialists etc., etc., as they eat at your table, study their literature. Whereas I am only a book-worm. Even so both of us have, finally, to make our diagnosis of the sophisticated as well as of the simple unbeliever by means of our "medicine book," the Bible.

When I talk of my sophisticated unbelieving friend I do not merely "soon discover" but rather "know in advance" that his "disease" is the same as that of my simple unbelieving friend. It is the disease of the "natural man." The symptoms are different but basically the disease is the same. The medication for both is the same. Both need to be told that they are in the way of death, that the wrath of God rests upon them and will abide upon them forever unless they repent and believe the gospel. Both of them must be told that they cannot do what yet they needs must do except the Holy Spirit enables them to do it. They do not understand themselves and their world for what they are because they do not see themselves and the world in the light of the triune God who everywhere confronts them with his claims. They are like men who might wander about on the campus of Westminster Seminary, appropriating to themselves what they pleased. When approached by Mr. Gregg and asked why they were taking things that did not belong to them they would look at him "innocently," as though surprised that this campus did belong to somebody. In reality they are trying to face the reality of the God who is.

How then shall we proclaim the gospel of the God who is there to twentieth century sophisticated man? Surely you say we must do so by setting forth before him the meaning of the gospel as we find it in the Scriptures. We must make unmistakably clear in what we say that the God who is there wants his love and service with the whole of his heart, as he engages himself in his calling whether as an artist, as a scientist, as a philosopher or as a theologian. He now follows his calling with himself as its center. He must therefore repudiate the goal of life, the standard of life and the motivation of life that have marked him up to this point. He must become a "new man" in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in order to respond properly, even if it be only in principle, to the God who is there.

But now the argument begins. Says Mr. Jones: "Are you asking me to believe that whole "system of doctrine" that your Westminster Confession of faith finds in

the Bible on your say so or on the authority of the Bible itself? Well, there are many other interpretations of the Bible besides yours. Moreover, there are a number of Bibles. Or do you appeal to the authority of Jesus speaking in and through the words of the Bible? If you do then you should know that if Jesus was really a man then he was, like all men, finite and as such immersed in the contingency of all space-time reality. If you claim that Jesus was "God" as well as man for instance, in the Westminster Catechism, then you should know that no man knows because no man can know anything about such a God. You remember what Socrates said. He wanted to know the essence of holiness regardless of what gods or men had said or did say about it. In modern times Immanuel Kant worked out the implications of this Socratic principle of human inwardness more fully than Socrates did. He points out to us that what man knows he knows because his own mind has impressed its categories of thought upon the raw stuff of experience. There can therefore be no knowledge of a God such as the Westminster Confession sets forth. There can be no such a god. How could there then be anything like what you call a revelation of such a God? Propositional revelations given by such a god to man is meaningless. All the schools of modern science and philosophy agree that to say God is there, in the sense of the traditional Confessions of the Church is to speak nonsense. Many of the typical modern scientists and philosophers may believe in a god. They even defend their belief in their god against naturalists, mechanists, and sceptics and materialists. They may believe in a personal god. They may want to give a spiritual, teleological interpretation to the course of history. For all that their gods are nothing more than projections of would-be autonomous moral consciousness of man. They agree with Kant that man himself is autonomous in the final point of reference in predication. In the eyes of all the major schools of modern thought the god who is there is dead. "When it comes to metaphysics," says Neuath, a member of the Vienna Circle, "one must indeed be silent, but not about anything."¹ Or, as the Cambridge philosopher, F. P. Ramsey, an enthusiastic follower of Wittgenstein puts it: "What we can't say we can't say, and we can't whistle it either."

When we turn to modern theology we soon discover that its major schools agree with the starting point, the method and the conclusions of modern science and philosophy. With one accord modern theologians contend that, even though, as over against naturalism, we must speak of God we must not speak of a God who is self-sufficient and whose revelation of himself is directly and clearly given in history, more particularly in Jesus. Suppose that Jesus did think he was the Son

¹ Gilbert Ryle, *Revolution in Philosophy*, p. 75.

of God. Suppose that in his own words we could hear him say that he is one with the eternal Father. Our principle of inwardness could not but rebel at this. Man is not truly a personal being if he must listen to extraneous voices. Robert Collingwood expresses the view of modern theology on the question of revelation well when he says that the modern historian must take such claims as Jesus makes when he says he has absolute authority as so much evidence into his own philosophy of history.

Such is, I believe, the attitude of modern sophisticated man in relation to the God who is there.

The Traditional Method

If this is the case then it goes without saying that we must present the God who is there to the modern man as the presupposition of the fact and the possibility of intelligent predication by man in any field. Man cannot interpret either himself or his environment for what it actually is except he do so in the speech of the God who is there.

The basic mistake of the traditional apologetic, such as was developed by the Roman-Catholic theologian-philosopher, Bishop Butler, is that it does not present Christianity as the light of the sun from which all other lights are derivatives. Yet, one can understand why a Roman Catholic or an Arminian theologian should refuse to give the God who is there his due. They are Roman Catholic or Arminian precisely because they attribute to man a measure of such "freedom" as is really autonomy. Accordingly they also maintain that the facts of man's environment are to some extent contingent, i.e. independent of God. Finally they maintain that the laws of human thinking, such as the law of contradiction are, exist and operate, to some extent, independently of the providence of God. In short by the methodology of traditional apologetics the God who is there is not presented as the presupposition of all intelligible human predication. That means that the God who is there is not properly presented. The gospel is not presented as the good news which gives men what they need for "rational thinking" and moral living.

Now I hold that you are in basic agreement with what I have said up to this point. When you speak of nihilism you say that it "can give neither a proper diagnosis nor the proper treatment for its own ills," and then add, "Christianity

has a diagnosis and then a solid foundation for an answer.”² Again: “Many of our most sensitive people have been left absolutely naked by the destruction.” The reference is to the despair of modern man. “In this situation” you continue, “which so desperately cries out for the remedy which only biblical Christianity can give we seem to be failing.”³ Once more: “The biblical Christian answer takes us back first to the very beginning of everything and states that personality is intrinsic in what is; not in the pantheistic sense of the universe being the extension of the essence of God (or what is), but that a God who is personal on the high order of Trinity created all else.”⁴

The triune God of which Scripture tells us is the God who is there. And this God has created man in his own image.⁵ Moreover: “God has spoken, in a linguistic propositional form, truth concerning Himself and truth concerning man, history and the universe.”⁶ Man can have unity. “The unity is there because God has spoken truth into all areas of our knowledge.”⁷

There is, accordingly, only one alternative to biblical Christianity. It is the alternative in which man takes himself instead of God who is there as self-explanatory. He who adopts this position has no final reference point for his experience. “Finite man in the external universe, being finite, has no sufficient reference point if he begins absolutely and autonomously from himself and thus needs certain knowledge. God gives us this in the Scriptures.”⁸ Again “modern man——” “has no adequate universal for love.” “On the other hand, the Christian does have the adequate universal he needs in order to able to discuss the meaning of love. Among the things we know about the Trinity is the Trinity was before the creation of everything else and that love existed between the persons of the Trinity before the foundation of the world. This being so, the existence of love as we know it in our own make-up does not have its origin in chance, but its origin is from that which has always been.”¹

Thus there are, as you indicate, two mutually exclusive interpretations of human life. There is the biblical and there is the non-biblical view of human life;

² p. 46.

³ p. 47.

⁴ p. 87.

⁵ p. 92.

⁶ p. 93.

⁷ p. 93.

⁸ p. 93.

¹ p. 97.

these two interpretations of life have mutually exclusive views on everything of which they converse.

The believer must show the unbeliever that his disbelief in the God who is there will result in his final intellectual and moral destruction. The believer cannot do this unless he shows the unbeliever that, on his presuppositions, there is no intelligible view of man and of his environment. The believer must show the unbeliever that on his view the ideas of "facts" and "logic" are alike unintelligible. The believer must present to the unbeliever the God who is there. This God cannot but speak with authority. This God is the God whom all men have insulted by refusing to love and obey him for their good. When the unbeliever learns to believe and knows the God who is there it is because God has in grace opened his eyes to see and softened his heart to love him. This is what the believer must tell the unbeliever. If he does not tell him this then he is not adequately speaking to his neighbor of the God who is there. Here is the failure of the traditional method of apologetics. It assumes that the unbeliever does know himself, and does know the nature of "fact" and "logic" correctly up to a point in terms of his own principle.

Difficulties I Have

I must now turn to certain difficulties that I have with your book. These difficulties all center around the question whether you are really presenting the God who is there adequately to modern man. Are you really adequately presenting the God who is there as the presupposition of the possibility of meaningful predication for man? Are you really adequately showing that unless one makes the god who is there the presupposition of all his intellectual and moral activities he, in effect, destroys human experience?

You say that "to try to work below the line of despair without a clear and defined concept of presuppositional apologetics is simply to destroy the possibility of helping twentieth century people. There is no use talking today until the presuppositions are taken into account, and especially the crucial presuppositions concerning the nature of truth and the method of attaining truth."²

Now, as we have seen, for the Christian truth is what the triune God, speaking in Scripture says it is. For the Christian the method of attaining truth is that of

²p. 126.

listening to what God says in Scripture about God and about his relation to the course of human history past, present and future. In contrast with this for the non-Christian the nature of truth is what man's speaking out of his own experience as self-sufficient, says it is. For the non-Christian the method of attaining truth is by listening as he plays back to himself the diary that he has kept of his past experiences and on the basis of it predicting what may possibly and probably come to pass in the future.

Basic to everything pertaining to the question of the nature of truth and to the method of attaining to truth is that for the Christian the triune God of Scripture is the source of possibility and for the non-Christian possibility is the source of God. For the Christian no man can ask any question about anything that is not answered in advance by the presence of the God who is there. Speaking in Scripture—whatever man accomplishes by successfully relating the laws of his thought to the facts of his experience is accomplished within the plan of God.

Herein, basically, lies the Christian's answer to the question of the nature of truth and to the question of the method of attaining truth. The God who is there has pre-interpreted every fact man meets and ordained the laws of thought by which man must relate the facts that he meets to one another.

For the non-Christian, and certainly for the modern non-Christian, the world, including man, has sprung from the womb of pure contingency. For the modern non-Christian the laws of thought themselves rest upon man as chance produced. If these laws did relate the facts of man's space-time experience to one another they would destroy the uniqueness of these facts. In short the entire view of truth and of the method of attaining truth is internally meaningless. Allow me to illustrate what I mean. Parmenides sought to apply the laws of thought to the facts of space-time experience. He argued simply that only that can be (exist) which we, human beings, applying the laws of logic to things (facts) consistently, i.e. without contradiction, can say must be (exist). Accordingly, there can be nothing new in history. The whole world of space-time change about us must, accordingly, be adjudged to be unreal.

On this view the whole of the Christian story, about creation, fall and redemption would be unreal.

Heraclitus also sought to apply the laws of thought to the facts of space-time experience. But, to escape the conclusion of such men as Parmenides, Heraclitus concluded that all things change. If anything changed all had to change. Both

Parmenides and Heraclitus assume, before they start developing their arguments, that man is not a creature of God. Man's thought is identical in nature with divine thought. Accordingly human thought, as well as "divine" thought is legislative for the nature of all possible existence. Man cannot think the non-existent and if he can think the existent it is because the existent is precisely and exclusively what he "thinks" it must be. If Parmenides thinks that God and man alike, are changeless, Heraclitus thinks that God and man alike are in flux. If either Parmenides or Heraclitus were right then the Christian story could not be true. Is it far-fetched to bring in Parmenides and Heraclitus when we are talking about presenting the gospel to modern man? I do not think so. Modern man still uses the law of contradiction as a standard by which he, assuming his own identity of his intellectual being with "God," determines, what is possible or not possible, in the world of space-time experience. Kant assures us that a God, which is more than the projection of the moral consciousness of the autonomous man, cannot exist. To say that such a God exists is to say nothing different than to say that he does not exist. A God such as historic Christians believe to be their God, cannot even on Kant's view be identified. To identify such a God you would have to do so by describing him exhaustively. If you succeeded in doing that you would, at the same time, in effect, have said that all other things than God are identical with God. It follows that the God of Christianity, cannot exist.

It does not matter whether modern men use the words of Kant or not. To the best of my knowledge there is no adherent of any of the major schools of modern post-Kantian philosophy that is not in basic agreement with Kant as he rejects the possibility of the existence of the God of Christianity. All apostate mankind, has, since the fall of Adam, assumed that man is not created by God, but "participates" in "God" if there be a God. All Apostate mankind has assumed therefore that by his logic he can determine what can or cannot exist in the space-time world. He may, with Parmenides, insist that all reality is flux. In the latter case he has to say that all reality is flux.

We read a good deal today about irrationalism and about irrationalist philosophers and theologians. But how "irrationalist" are these modern irrationalists? Are there any that will claim to accept orthodox Christianity, with its story of creation, fall and redemption and at the same time accept a philosophy of flux? I am thinking of such men and schools of thought as are found in a book called *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by William Barrett and Henry D. Aiken (1962). They speak of Pragmatism, of Analytical Philosophy, of Positivism, of Phenomenology and of Existentialism, of Marxism and of Neo-Orthodoxy. Could we find a representative of any one of these schools who would maintain

that he could intelligently hold to what we think of as the biblical view of the relation of God to man while holding to his own view of this relation at the same time?

Specific Difficulties

I turn now to specific questions dealt with in your book. Before I do so allow me to make one more general remark. I understand what you are opposing. You want, first, to show that Christianity has no sympathetic irrationalism of any sort whether philosophical or theological. Secondly, you have no sympathy with rationalism whether in philosophy or in theology. Thirdly, you oppose a method that many would connect with my name. According to this method a Christian meeting a non-Christian would say: "I have one set of presuppositions and you have another set of presuppositions; there is, therefore no point to our reasoning together."

Keeping these points in mind will help me, I hope, not to ascribe to such positions as you yourself oppose.

Absolutes

My first difficulty pertains to what you say about "absolutes." Before the first world "every one would have been working on much the same presuppositions, which in practice seemed to accord with the Christian's own presuppositions. This was true both in the areas of epistemology and methodology." What were these presuppositions? The basic one was that there really are such things as absolutes. They accepted the possibility of an absolute in the area of Being (or knowledge), and in the area of morals. Therefore, because they accepted the possibility of absolutes, though men might disagree on what these were, nevertheless they could reason together on the classical basis of antitheses.¹

In those days people could understand what I, as a Christian would be talking about. "Thirty or more years ago you could have said such things as 'This is true' or 'This is right,' and you would have been on everybody's wave length."²

My basic difficulty here is that you seem to be committing yourself to some form of the traditional method of apologetics. If only we were able to get people

¹ p. 14.

² p. 14.

today to admit the possibility of absolutes we would be on their wave length again.

The traditional method of apologetics starts with the assumption that the natural man is fully justified in assuming that he can and does interpret reality correctly up to a point. Thomas Aquinas does not challenge: (a) the assumption of the natural man with respect to his own supposed self-existence and self-knowledge as autonomous (b) the assumption of the natural man with respect to the pure contingency of the "facts" of his environment and (c) the assumption of the natural man with respect to the laws of logic as operating independently of the plan of God.

Thomas Aquinas wanted to show the natural man that he could, on his own premises, allow for the possibility of the existence of God. Having granted the possibility of the existence of God the natural man could then go on to the idea of the probability of God's revealing himself to man. You know the argument. Bishop Butler's position is similar to that of Thomas.

The argument starts from the bottom. The believer must not tell the unbeliever that he misinterprets (a) man, (b) the "facts" of his environment and the laws of logic unless he presupposes the truth of what Scripture as the Word of God says about them. The Bible says that nothing comes to pass because nothing can come to pass except it be in accordance with the plan of God. God is the source of possibility. On the non-Christian basis possibility is the source of God. On the traditional view of apologetics I must, as a believer, hold that God is the source of possibility and then as an apologist I must agree with the unbeliever that possibility is the source of God. I must, as a believer, accept on the authority of Christ what the triune God speaking in Scripture tells me about myself as made in the image of God, as under the wrath of God because of my sin but as restored to the image of God in Christ. I must accept what Scripture tells me about the whole temporal-spatial world of factuality as created by God, as providentially controlled by God, as manifesting the "wrath" of God because of man's sin but as, in principle, redeemed by the death and resurrection of Christ. I must use the gift of logical reasoning, given me as an image-bearer of God, as a tool by means of which I may explore the riches of the revelation of God to man. In short, every act of interpretation on my part, is to be a reinterpretation of God's revelation to me. Before the fall God spoke to man about his task in relation to the facts of "nature." This was, as Geerhardus Vos calls it, pre-redemptive special or "supernatural" revelation. In the Scriptures we have Christ speaking to us, telling us of his redemption of us and of the world. In Adam all

men disobeyed. They are now under the curse of God. But Christ, being made a curse for us, has set us free from the bondage of sin. We now no longer think of ourselves, of the "facts" within and about us and of the logical laws of thought as "just there." Christ has set us free from such notions. The Holy Spirit has given us a new heart, so that we now see ourselves, as well as the world of fact and logic for what they are.

But now on the traditional view of apologetics I must allow, when I begin my conversation with an unbeliever that he may be right when he holds precisely the opposite of all this. But if I admit that he may be right I am, in effect also admitting that I am wrong, and that he not only may be right but actually is right.

When Aquinas seeks to prove that God exists without from the outset telling us from the outset what God is, he is talking about a pure abstraction. A that without a what is meaningless. This is to me the whole point of the Reformation and, more particularly, of Calvin. Calvin starts out by telling us what God is, what man is and what the world is. Of course he takes his information on the what of God, the what of man and the what of the world from the Bible. When a man starts from the supposed intelligibility of himself and of the world from his own experience and then, after that, concludes that a god exists then this god is invariably not the God that actually exists. Even when modern idealists such as F. H. Bradley, Bernard Bosanquet and Josiah Royce conclude that an absolute must exist, this absolute is invariably not the God who exists as Christians know him from Scripture.

You do not, of course, mean for an instant that the absolutes of the men before the world war were identical with the God who is there. You are merely contending that those who believed in the possibility of absolutes were on the same wave length with us as Christians. They could understand what we mean by the God who is there better than people who no longer believe in the possibility of absolutes understand us today. We could have reasoned with these earlier men on the "classic basis of antithesis." They agreed with us that A is A and not non-A. Today, you add, people work by the "method of synthesis." Things have changed for the worse. We must therefore keep on using the method of antithesis in order to challenge the current method of synthesis. I shall come back to this presently. For the moment I am concerned to say that by your assertion with respect to men believing in absolutes you have, I think, made it impossible for yourself to do what you are most anxious to do, namely, challenge men to forsake their irrationalism, their rationalism and their inadequate presuppositionalism in terms of the God who is there.

There has been a good deal of discussion among the students in the seminary group here as to what your basic contention is. One group says that you are obviously challenging the world of unbelief in terms of the God who is there, namely the triune God of Scripture. Another group claims that your method is similar to the traditional method of apologetics in which the natural man is given the competence to judge of the truth or falsity of certain statements with respect to space-time facts before looking into Scripture. Each group admits that the other group can find passages in your book which might make their contention seem to be plausible.

But then both sides add that there is a certain amount of obscurity in your book and that, therefore, you do not really state your position adequately. My own opinion is that you are indeed committed to the biblical view of apologetics. You hold that Christianity alone has the answer to the problem of man. Christianity must be taken as the presupposition of the possibility of predication. I hold to this conviction in spite of the fact that you nowhere commit yourself clearly to this position.

However, though I hold to this conviction I cannot deny that there is a good deal of material in your book which points to the idea that you want to prove the rationale of Christianity by showing that it is in accord with "fact" and in accord with "logic" as the non-Christian understand "fact" and "logic." The lack of clarity in your book is therefore, I think, due to the fact that you are seeking to combine the traditional method of apologetics which starts from below with the biblical method of apologetics which starts from above. I proceed now to substantiate this claim by discussing your views on the starting point, the method and the conclusion of your reasoning process with the unbeliever.

Starting Point

The question of starting point is, of course, of basic importance. On this point, as on every point, you hold that the present situation "desperately cries out for the remedy which only biblical Christianity can give." ¹ "It is plain" you say, "therefore, that from the viewpoint of the Scriptures themselves there is a unity over the whole field of knowledge. God has, spoken, in a linguistic propositional form, truth concerning Himself and truth concerning man, history and the universe." ²

¹ p. 47.

² p. 92-93.

What then has God said about man to whom he gives his revelation? "The Christian answer begins by saying that man is a moral creature made in the image of God the Creator; that there is a law in the universe which, if broken, means that man is culpable."³ And man has broken the law of God at the beginning of history. "Christianity says that man is now abnormal—he is separated from his Creator, who is his only sufficient reference point—not by a metaphysical limitation, but by a true moral guilt. As a result he is now also separated from his fellow men, from nature and himself."⁴

The point of contact, with the unbeliever must, therefore, be found in the fact that all men are created in the image of God. Paul says that as image bearers of God all men, deep in their hearts, know God is their creator. They have as Calvin, following Paul puts it, an ineradicable sense of deity within them. Even when the prodigal son is at the swinetrough, he knows that he has been spending his father's substance. Even though the natural man is always engaged in proving to himself and others that he together with the facts of the universe and the laws of logic has sprung from Chance, he knows that he is trying to make himself believe all this in order to escape the voice of God that always and everywhere persecutes him.

One of the most effective ways of deceiving himself invented by the natural man is to look at himself and the facts of the world and then by the laws of logic applied to himself and to the facts of the world, conclude that absolutes may possibly exist. Having done this he can say with the Pharisee: Lord I thank thee that I believe thou doest possibly exist, and that I am not like the naturalists, the positivists or even as this pragmatist. Thus he justifies to himself his own apostasy from the God who is there, the triune God of Scripture.

The Christian believer must therefore make unmistakably clear to those who believe in this possibility of absolutes, as he does to the existentialist, the positivist, etc. that the wrath of God rests upon him unless he repents and goes before the self-attesting Christ of Scripture.

He must permit Christ to diagnose his disease and, at the same time prescribe the remedy. He must repent of saying, in effect, that the God who is there may possibly not exist.

³ p. 105.

⁴ p. 104.

But now comes the other side. In contradistinction from what has just been said you seem to find your point of contact for the gospel with the unbeliever in some area of interpretation of man and the world that you have in common with him. Chapter 5 of your book deals with the question: "How do we know it is True?" Well, to make the answer clear you give the illustration of a "book which has been mutilated, leaving just one inch of printed matter on each page." *p. 108* After a bit the "torn off parts of each page are found in the attic." The "whole man" is now "relieved" that "the mystery of the book" has been solved. He now realizes that it was his reason which first told him "that the portions which were discovered were the proper solution to the problem of the ripped book." ¹

Now apply the parable of the book. First "the ripped pages remaining in the book correspond to the abnormal universe and the abnormal man we now have. The parts of the pages which are discovered correspond to the Scriptures. Neither the abnormal external word nor the abnormal 'mannishness' of man can give the answer to the whole meaning of the created order, yet they are both important in knowing that the Scriptures, God's communication to man, are what they claim to be." ²

If I understand this illustration of the book then it lowers the biblical teaching with respect to the revelation that comes to man through the external world and through the "mannishness" of man. Does not Paul teach that all men everywhere, are everywhere confronted with a clear revelation of God in the world about them and in their own constitution. Do not all men have the same revelation that was given to Adam at the beginning of history? And whatever "obscuration" may have come about in this revelation because of the sin of man is not this revelation still so clear as to leave man wholly without excuse for not recognizing God as their Creator? Calvin stresses this teaching of Paul when he constantly says that men ought to observe the presence of God's operation within and about them, since it is there clearly to be seen. Knowing God because of this inescapable revelation within and about them, they hold under this revelation in order to excuse themselves for their sins. Now you seem to be teaching that men, since the fall, have only a fragment of the revelation that God originally gave to man left to them. Thus the claim of God upon man is reduced and to that extent he may be said to have an excuse. How could man be expected to know God as his creator from a fragment of revelation?

¹ p. 108.

² p. 108–109.

Concomitant with this narrowing and lowering of the idea of revelation is the idea, expressed in immediate connection with your book illustration, to the effect that the natural man has the competence to judge whether what Scripture teaches is true. The natural man must reason from the facts of the external world and from the "mannishness of man" whether what Scripture claims to be a revelation of God really is what it claims to be. Thus revelation comes at the end of a process of reasoning that is independent of revelation. Revelation is no longer the presupposition of the possibility of reasoning but reasoning is the presupposition of the possibility and reality of revelation. Paul is made to teach natural theology instead of revelation in nature. I quote:

In dealing with the question of proof which has been raised by the illustration of the book, I want to suggest that scientific proof, philosophical proof and religious proof follow the same rules. We may have any problem before us which we wish to solve; it may concern a chemical reaction or the meaning of man. After the question has been defined, in each case proof consists of two steps:

A. The theory must be non-contradictory and must give an answer to the phenomena in question.

B. We must be able to live consistently with our theory. For example, the answer given to the chemical reaction to what we observe in the test tube. With regard to man and his 'mannishness,' the answer must conform to what we observe in a wide consideration of man and how he behaves.

Specifically in relation to the question of man, does the Christian answer conform to and explain what we observe concerning man as he is (including my knowledge of myself as a man)?³

Am I wrong when I say that here you are not as a Christian pleading with your non-Christian friend to admit that on his assumption of human autonomy he has no starting point or standard for asking any legitimate question, let alone finding any answer about any fact of the universe? Am I wrong when I say that here you are not merely, for the sake of argument but in reality identifying yourself with the unbeliever so that together you may discover whether the Christian answer is really a proper answer to your common problem? You do not show your friend that on his assumption of pure contingency no fact can be distinguished from any other fact. You do not show your friend that on his assumption the law of contradiction would have no intelligible connection with factuality. You do not point out to your friend that in assuming his autonomous self-knowledge he

³p. 109.

must seek for identification with abstract unity and at the same time seek to escape identification with abstract unity by flying off into the swamp of pure contingency. You do not show your friend that his pure rationalism and his pure irrationalism leads him toward as it springs from a view of man in which the "mannishness of man" operates in a vacuum. In short you are not speaking to your friend of the God who is there, by asking him to return to the Father's house.

Method

You are here, together with your friend, on his principles, asking whether the Christian answer conforms to the criteria you have already established independent of that answer.

What you say in the section I have quoted cannot, as I see it, possibly be harmonized with the idea that the God of the Bible is the possibility of intelligent predication. But if there were doubt on this point there is a good deal of additional evidence in your book to corroborate what I have said about this passage. Let me point to some of this evidence.

a. You claim that "the existence of the external universe and its form and the 'mannishness' of man demonstrate the truth of the historic Christian position."⁴ This appears to mean that historic Christianity passes the test set for it by man as autonomous. "Christianity constitutes a non-self-contradictory answer that does explain the phenomena and that can be lived with, both in life and in scholarly pursuits."⁵ It is "rationality" that "defines and provides a form for the whole."⁶ A "man must live in reality, and reality consists of two parts: the external world and its form, and man's 'mannishness,' including his own 'mannishness.'"⁷

b. Apologetics, you say, must "begin with man and what he knows about himself."⁸ Accordingly, "God, in order to point out how false his position has been, will only need to refer to what man has known of the external world and 'mannishness.'"⁹

⁴ p. 111.

⁵ p. 111.

⁶ p. 112.

⁷ p. 121.

⁸ p. 123.

⁹ p. 123.

"The truth that we let in first is not a dogmatic statement of the truth of the Scriptures but the truth of the external world and the truth of what man himself is."¹⁰ But do we have to "let in" this truth? Clearly not. Man already knows "the external world and 'mannishness.'" " God doesn't have to tell him and we don't have to tell him what God has told us. God needs only to "refer" to what he already knows; surely this is also all we as believers in God, need to do, as we seek to win men to an acceptance of Christianity.

c. That we need only to refer "to what non-Christian men already know is of particular importance when it comes to the question of what they really need is concerned. You say that "when modern man feels dead, he is experiencing what the Word of God tells him he is."¹¹ You say that "already men are part way to the gospel, for they too believe that man is dead, dead in the sense of meaningless."¹² The "positive side of apologetics" you assert "is the communication of the Gospel to the present generation in terms that they can understand."¹³ Fortunately they do already, before hearing of the Gospel understand the external world and the "mannishness" of man, and therefore understand their need. "Often he understands the horrible point of meaninglessness."¹⁴ Before a man is ready to become a Christian, he must have a proper understanding of truth, whether he has fully analyzed his concept of truth or not."¹⁵

We must and can, therefore, as Christians enter upon a discussion with our non-Christian friends. We must not "tell him to believe on blind authority. He has a right to ask questions."¹⁶ We must show our friend that "perhaps there will be a solution "from God's side" to the problem of human guilt. We may show him that there is a hope of a solution to the dilemma of man."¹⁷ We may show him that "in the biblical position there is the possibility of verifiable facts involved:—" ¹⁸ We may show him that Christianity has an "adequate universal for love."¹⁹ Christianity "is realistic." It "stands up to the test of rationality and the whole of life as we must live it." It assures us "that personality is intrinsic in what is—" ²⁰ it

¹⁰ p. 129.

¹¹ p. 130.

¹² p. 47.

¹³ p. 140.

¹⁴ p. 130.

¹⁵ p. 143.

¹⁶ p. 128.

¹⁷ p. 106.

¹⁸ p. 92.

p. 97.

²⁰ p. 87.

has an "adequate and reasonable explanation for the source and meaning of personality."¹ It assures us that "Personality as such cannot necessarily imply limitedness."² It satisfies the principle of rationality and, in addition, satisfies the whole man.³

Now all this is, I suppose, meant to assure modern twentieth century man that when we ask him to accept Christianity we are not asking him to abdicate his God-given power of reason and of moral judgment. You are not preaching in terms of blind authority. You do not ask him to believe and in believing make a leap in the dark.

However, in seeking to do so, you have, I fear capitulated at the crucial points of human anatomy, and therefore of pure contingency and abstract logic, and in doing so, you are to that extent, frustrating your own purpose.

(1) In the first place you obscure the issue. You are not setting the thought-content of apostate man. To present the God who is there to men and to speak to "historic Christianity into the Twentieth Century" Climate requires that we make a clear-cut distinction between the thought-content of Christian and of apostate thought. You cannot intelligently challenge any man to change his position unless it is shown him (a) that in terms of the God who is there can any man even ask any intelligible question, and (b) that if he continues to operate on his assumptions chaos results and the wrath of God abides upon him.

Conclusion

Finally, I ask to what conclusion you can come to if you adopt the position that the unbeliever is not, from the outset, mistaken in his starting point and method. What can you offer the unbeliever as a substitute for his position? The answer is, I think, clear. The starting point, the method and the "conclusion" of the Christian position are involved in one another. Similarly the starting point, the method and the conclusion of the non-Christian position are involved in one another.

Accordingly, if you grant to the non-Christian that his problematics are right, he can compel you logically to the idea that his answer is also right. In his recent book *Between Faith and Thought* Richard Kroner says that the basic problematics

¹ p. 88.

² p. 95.

³ p. 113.

of modern man is well expressed in the question: "Why is there anything at all and not absolutely nothing."⁴ The Christian believing in the God who is there cannot admit that this question is a legitimate question. It assumes the impossibility of the truth of the Christian answer. The Christian dare not go back of the God who is there and ask whether or not he is there. Whom is there to ask whether the God who is there is there? Only man himself, having first reduced the God who is there to a god who cannot possibly be there, must answer this question. But this man, now operating together with his God in the vacuum of pure possibility cannot answer his own question and cannot intelligently ask it. Sartre's case offers a good illustration of the hopeless plight of modern man. Sartre insists that man is free. There is nothing that in any way controls him. In order to make sure that he is free Sartre insists that the God who is there cannot possibly exist. Of course Sartre knows that he has not, strictly speaking, produced himself. Some sort of "fate" or "chance" has washed him up on the shores of the shoreless ocean of chance. Knowing this Sartre does the sort of thing Parmenides did. He attributes legislative power to the laws of logic by which he must think and says that reality must be what he, thinking logically, says it must be. To be sure Parmenides used logic "positively" and Sartre uses it "negatively." Parmenides was a "flaming rationalist" while Sartre is a "flaming irrationalist." But Parmenides assumed the purely contingent nature of the facts of the temporal-spatial world. The temporal-spatial world was "unreal." How else, he argued, can we maintain the legitimate demands of logic? Yet, for all that, in order to maintain the "unreality" of the space-time world, he must, above all, establish the "nothingness" of God. Only if the nothingness of God as creator of man and his cosmic environment is established as the consequence of the natural and rightful demand of man's logical thought, can man truly be free. Man cannot be, according to Parmenides, truly free if he is a creature of God. Man must be free as somehow sprung from pure contingency. Parmenides idea of logic is correlative to the idea of pure contingency.

For all practical purposes the position of Sartre on this point is similar to that of Parmenides. Parmenides needs the notion of pure contingency as correlative to the notion of exhaustive rationality as correlative to the notion of pure contingency.

Parmenides cannot be the flaming rationalist that he wants to be unless, at the same time he is a flaming irrationalist. Sartre could not be the flaming irrationalist that he is unless, at the same time, he is a flaming rationalist.

⁴ Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 40.

The would-be autonomous man who is always at the same time rationalistic and irrationalistic is not really challenged to accept Christianity, if Christianity is not set before him as the presupposition of the asking of intelligible questions about anything. If you allow that, the question why anything exists at all is a legitimate and intelligible question you have therewith allowed that nothingness, or chance is an ultimate source of plurality and evil. When you have admitted this you cannot consistently object if your unbelieving friend says that you do not really believe in the God in whom you profess to believe. Try as you will you cannot then offer modern man a position that is not itself a mere "ethical" postulation of the primacy of the I-thou over the I-it dimension. Kroner's own view illustrates this point. He argues against the defenders of the primacy of nothingness by saying that negation must always be "the negation of the positive."⁵ "Asking presupposes existence and thereby admits the prevalence of the positive."⁶ But the positive which Kroner postulates is a faith-constructed patterned after Kant's idea of the primacy of the practical reason. Of this positive, this absolute, nothing can be known. If anything could be known of this "positive" then it would not be such a positive as we need.

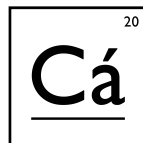
It is in such terms as these that the prevalent notion of the I-thou dimension as being "above" the I-it dimension rests. Yet, the whole edifice of this modern personalism rests on the assumption that man can intelligently ask the question why something rather than pure nothingness exists. Modern man does not realize that he actually presupposes that he himself is as self-sufficient and autonomous, precisely that which the God who is there tells us he is. Modern apostate man, even more obviously than ancient apostate man, has taken the place of the creator-redeemer God of Scripture. I think that this is what you basically want to tell modern man. He must know this; when he knows this he is saved. So long as he does not know this he remains in his lost condition.

So far as you follow the traditional method of apologetic you cannot tell modern man of his real predicament. You may try to prove to him that personality is not necessarily finite but that it is basic to all that is. The modern dimensionalist philosophy does the same. You may say over and over that you believe in the God of the Bible and in the teaching of the Bible with respect to man but so far as your argument is concerned you are asking your friend to believe what you believe as a blind faith construct.

⁵ Op. Cit. p. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Surely we must not merely present our position and say that because it rests on presuppositions which are opposite to those of modern man we cannot reason together. There would be no possibility of reasoning together unless it be on the presuppositions of the God who is there.¹



Cántaro Institute Digital Library
(1980-2018) Reformational Publishing Project
(2019-2022) Reformational Digital Library

¹Van Til, C., & Sigward, E. H. (1997). *The works of Cornelius Van Til, 1895-1987* (electronic ed.). New York: Labels Army Co.