

TWO CHRISTIAN WARRIORS:
CORNELIUS VAN TIL AND FRANCIS A. SCHAEFFER
COMPARED

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CORNELIUS Van Til died in 1987, three years after Francis A. Schaeffer. It is still too early to assess the legacies of these two very different figures in twentieth-century apologetics. Van Til spent most of his professional life teaching at Westminster Seminary. Schaeffer was a pastor, then an evangelist in a community setting.¹ Van Til wrote extensively, tackling subjects related mostly to philosophy and theology. Schaeffer was a speaker first, and a writer only secondarily (although his readership was actually wider than Van Til's, owing no doubt to his immense popularity in evangelical circles). Though they both had a Reformed background, Van Til affirmed his commitment to the system taught in the Reformed creeds throughout his polemics. Schaeffer did so only tangentially. What can be learned by comparing these two so different people?

A great deal, I believe. First, the two thinkers are not always clearly understood, either by their critics or their allies. Comparing them helps clarify both their positions. In the process, apologetic method is understood more clearly. Not only can basic issues in apologetic methodology be clarified: there are questions of style, and even tone, as well as matters of content in apologetics. Accordingly, Van Til and Schaeffer differed in mode, or manner, as well as in substance. Recognizing this dimension should tell us much about their significance, while in no way ignoring the substantive issues.

Second, Van Til took issue with Schaeffer on a number of basic apologetical questions. Cornelius Van Til was known for his polemics not only with unbelievers, but with other Christian apologists with whom he differed. Not everyone appreciated his willingness to attack fellow evangelicals, especially when they appeared to agree with much of his approach. But in his mind, he was carrying out the proper work of a Reformed controversialist. Schaeffer did not escape his critical pen, and much of the present article will be based on Van Til's critique. Yet, at l'Abri, the

¹ Various biographies of Schaeffer exist. In addition to the material by Edith Schaeffer, which is rather extensive, one can find a "no-warts" biography in the first few chapters of Louis G. Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer: The Man and His Message* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1985). See also the tribute by J. I. Packer, "No Little Person," in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer* (ed. Ronald W. Ruesegger; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 7-17.

community he founded, Francis Schaeffer engaged in discussions with people from all walks of life using an apologetic method which he believed to be very close to Van Til's own. Was he mistaken? What should we make of Van Til's critique? Was it justified? Was it fair? Was it useful and edifying? Did Schaeffer respond appropriately?

At one level, the task appears simple. Not only have both men written extensively, but at one point a polemic developed between them. Though Van Til did most of the writing in this dispute,² Schaeffer also articulated his reactions in a less formal way. So some source material for comparison is there. At another level, however, it is not as easy as it appears to compare them. One of the major difficulties of our task is trying to establish a level playing field. In order justly to compare them, it is necessary to harmonize the terms and connotations used by the two thinkers, as well as to tackle larger issues. It also means making sense of various contrary impressions. One impression, for example, is that Schaeffer was simply not an academic, so the polemic was not on the same terms. When asked at a large meeting in Anaheim, California, whether he was a presuppositionalist or an evidentialist, Schaeffer answered: "I'm neither. I'm not an evidentialist or a presuppositionalist. You're trying to press me into the category of a theological apologist, which I'm really not." The rest of the quote is important for our purposes as well: "I'm not an academic, scholastic apologist. My interest is in evangelism."³

In reality things are not so simple. Surface impressions are misleading. Schaeffer was not so innocent of involvement with academics as he claimed. He liked to picture himself as being in touch with the great thinkers and artists of the day. He was not afraid to discuss Aquinas, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and other philosophers. In fact many who came to l'Abri had the impression that it was a constant philosophy seminar.

Another impression is that Schaeffer disavowed presuppositionalism. Early on in l'Abri, he gave a lecture called "Christian Apologetics" in which he sided with J. Oliver Buswell, criticizing Van Til's apparent disdain for evidences.⁴ This would appear to settle matters altogether. Yet, as was mentioned above, Schaeffer often claimed to be a Van Tilian, at least in the sense that he shared the basic presuppositional approach. He constantly called for recognizing presuppositions in an argument. This can be documented over and over in his writings. For example, in *The God Who Is There*, which is a foundational book, perhaps the book that is basic to all the

² Though there were conversations and miscellaneous letters, the two principal documents are "A Letter to Francis Schaeffer," dated March 11, 1969 (copy in WTS Library); and "The Apologetic Methodology of Francis A. Schaeffer," a 60-page collection of reflections on various Schaeffer texts, dated March 22, 1974 (copy in WTS Library).

³ Jack Rogers, "Francis Schaeffer: The Promise and the Problem," *Reformed Journal* 27 (1977) 12-13.

⁴ "Christian Apologetics" tape no. 13.2, listed along with many available l'Abri tapes in Parkhurst, *Francis Schaeffer*, 230. Many of these notions were set forth much earlier in Francis Schaeffer, "A Review of a Review," in *The Bible Today* 42/1 (October 1948).

others,⁵ the opening chapter is about presuppositions. He even makes the statement, “so now for us, more than ever before, a presuppositional apologetic is imperative.”⁶ The fourth section of this book sets forth a method for identifying the non-Christian’s presuppositions in contradistinction from his or her ability to think or live consistently with them.⁷

A fascinating anecdote brings out the way that at least on one level Schaeffer actually felt very close to Van Til. He visited Westminster Seminary a number of times, and President Edmund Clowney would try to sit them down together to hash out their differences. On one of these occasions, Clowney recalls, they were in his office, and Van Til tried various ways to start a debate. Whenever he affirmed a particular point, however, Schaeffer replied, “I agree with that.” Finally, perhaps a bit frustrated, Van Til launched into a fifteen-minute summary of his whole apologetic, beginning, as he was fond of doing, with Adam and Eve and going through all of his basic credo, using the many illustrations his students are familiar with. At the end of his speech, Schaeffer, obviously moved, declared: “That is the most beautiful statement on apologetics I’ve ever heard. I wish there had been a tape recorder here. I would make it required listening for all l’Abri workers.” This from a man who did not compliment other theologians easily.⁸

Van Til also showed some evidence of real sympathy and even enthusiasm about Schaeffer. Not only are his criticisms nuanced with an unusually generous amount of complimentary statements, but he had admiration for the work of l’Abri in a number of ways. Another anecdote shows this. In the late sixties Richard Keyes, who now directs the branch of l’Abri in Massachusetts, wrote some rather critical things about Van Til from a Schaefferian point of view. In response, Van Til wrote a letter in which he distanced himself from the method of apologetics espoused at l’Abri. But then, in the mid-seventies, a positive event took place. The l’Abri staff was taking one of Schaeffer’s films around the country, followed by seminars with questions and answers. When they came to Philadelphia, Keyes was the designated speaker. Van Til sat in the audience, and Keyes was rather apprehensive about what he might say. However, instead of making any public remarks, Van Til waited till the end, came up to Keyes, wrapped his arms around him in a hug, and said, “This is simply marvelous, keep up this good work for the Lord!”

⁵ Schaeffer himself talked of three books being fundamental to his apologetic method: *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1968); *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1968); *He Is There and He Is Not Silent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1972). These have been gathered into one volume: *The Francis A. Schaeffer Trilogy: The Three Essential Books in One Volume* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1990). Though there is a sense in which the three volumes carry much weight, Schaeffer’s message is much broader than what they contain. One could even speculate that his impact was not primarily because of his books, but because of personal contact, the tapes, and the seminars at l’Abri.

⁶ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 15 (emphasis his).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 121

⁸ This episode was recounted in a personal conversation with Edmund Clowney.

What should we make of such contradictory data? We will proceed in four stages. First, we shall consider areas of agreement or complementarity; second, two preliminary problem areas; third, basic differences; and finally, some reflections about style. Allow me to say that this article has given me some pause. I was converted at l'Abri, in a conversation with Francis Schaeffer, and became his close friend in subsequent years. I also studied with Cornelius Van Til for three years and got to know him fairly well. His approach to apologetics is the major influence on my own. When I was a student at Westminster Seminary, the controversy of Van Til versus Schaeffer was beginning to flare up, and a number of us were involved. I have been able to dig up old papers and letters from those days, and it has been fascinating to relive some of those debates. In any case, I believe this is a most important subject, not only because I, as we all do, want to settle certain issues surrounding the people who have meant most in my life, but especially because the issues themselves are crucial for the church.

I. *Areas of Agreement*

One could no doubt find many areas of agreement at different levels, not all of which directly relate to apologetics. For example, in common with Van Til, Schaeffer was a Presbyterian and believed the Reformed Confessions to be the best expression of biblical truth.⁹ They also both were pastors in separated churches.¹⁰ To be sure, from his sermons and books about the Bible, the Christian life, and matters of doctrine, one can detect in Schaeffer's approach a number of influences other than Reformed orthodoxy.¹¹ Yet he was willing to state publicly that he was Reformed, and happily so.

Another major area of agreement is the stress on presuppositions. Throughout his writings, and in dialogue with unbelievers, Schaeffer returned over and over again to presuppositions. We have already mentioned

⁹ It might be said that Van Til had more of a Continental heritage, and that he was more informed by Dordt, Heidelberg, the Belgic Confession, etc., and even by Reformed (as contrasted to Presbyterian) ecclesiology, than Schaeffer. When discussing his allegiance to Reformed theology, Schaeffer referred most often to Hodge. He shared some of Hodge's Scottish Realism, as we shall see. He also had leanings toward American fundamentalism. Still, both Schaeffer and Van Til were Presbyterians and separationists.

¹⁰ Schaeffer was, of course, more radical in his separatist leanings than Van Til. He attended Westminster Seminary for a year, but then he followed Buswell, MacRae, and MacIntyre in the forming of Faith Seminary and the Bible Presbyterian Church. This meant, among other things, renouncing the so-called Christian liberties, and believing nondispensationalist premillennialism. He would later part company with the MacIntyre movement, joining the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, which eventually merged with the Presbyterian Church in America.

¹¹ His approach to sanctification, though basically Reformed, draws from various traditions, including the Keswick movement. He appears at times not to understand the Reformed emphasis on the sovereignty of God in the Christian life. He tends to make sanctification somewhat dependent on conscious awareness. See Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1971) 102.

this emphasis in connection with *The God Who Is There*. But all of his writings use the concept, to the point that authors like Clark Pinnock and Thomas Morris simply identify Schaeffer's method with presuppositionalism as such, and attack him because of it.¹² Furthermore, Schaeffer was deeply committed to the notion of worldview thinking. Because l'Abri gave the impression of being unique, and of teaching that is so idiomatic, it is easy to overlook the strength of the Kuyperian background of its message. Biographers do not sufficiently stress the significance of the day Francis Schaeffer met Hans Rookmaaker, the art historian at the Free University of Amsterdam. Rookmaaker had a decided influence on the way Schaeffer conceived of culture and worldview.¹³ Worldview thinking was central to Schaeffer's apologetic. He used the notion in a basically Van Tilian way, stressing its connection to the basic commitments of believers and unbelievers.¹⁴ He criticized the methods of both modern epistemology and of pietism because they could not present a unified picture of the world. He also engaged in discourse about many spheres of life: the arts, science, government, justice, etc.

It is an exaggeration to say, with D. G. Blomberg, that there are basically two influences on Schaeffer's presentation of Christianity, Cornelius Van Til and the Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea.¹⁵ At the same time, the way Schaeffer understood modern culture does owe a great deal to those two sources. Flowing from them, for example, is Schaeffer's diagnosis that modern thought is dialectical. He used vivid language to characterize non-Christian epistemology: upper and lower story, nature trying to "eat up" grace, "jumping upstairs," etc. His basic point is similar to Dooyeweerd's analysis of the dialectical character of the ground motives of successive stages in Western thought: form-matter, nature-grace, and nature-freedom. In fact, Schaeffer uses some of these same categories in his book *Escape from Reason*.¹⁶ Non-Christian epistemology, unable to integrate around the

¹² See Clark H. Pinnock, "Schaeffer on Modern Theology," in *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer*, 177; and Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976) 21.

¹³ Rookmaaker also shared the separationist ecclesiology of the Schaeffers. He would eventually found a Dutch l'Abri, which is still functioning. I once heard Schaeffer say that their thinking was so mutual that he couldn't tell where his own began and Rookmaaker's ended.

¹⁴ Schaeffer's antithetical method, which reduces worldviews to just a few (ultimately, two, the believing and the unbelieving), has frustrated his critics. Jack Rogers retorts that anthropologists have discovered thousands of worldviews, and that the responsible missionary must be trained in order to translate the gospel into these cultural modes. It is telling that, for Rogers, what each worldview has in common is the religious *need*, not a faith commitment. He would have had to level the same criticism at Van Til ("Francis Schaeffer, the Promise and the Problem," 15).

¹⁵ D. G. Blomberg, "Apologetic Education: Francis Schaeffer and l'Abri," *Journal of Christian Education* 54 (1975) 5-6.

¹⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968) *passim*. Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture* (Toronto: Wedge, 1979) 15.

ultimate point of origin, is necessarily dialectical. Van Til's diagnosis of apostate thought is along the same lines. While differing in content from one era to the next, all human thought from Parmenides to the present is a dualism, according to Van Til. His most frequent designation for the dialectic is that it is rationalistic and irrationalistic at the same time. Sometimes he calls it "pure contingency and pure chance."¹⁷ More colorfully, he talks also of a "highway in the sky," or a string of pearls that has lost its string. Schaeffer tended to stress the irrationalism of modern thought more than its rationalism, and Van Til legitimately criticized him for that.¹⁸ At the same time, Van Til admits that Schaeffer's intentions are on target: "I think I understand what you are opposing. You want, first, to show that Christianity has no sympathy with *irrationalism* of any sort whether philosophical or theological. Secondly, you have no sympathy with *rationalism* whether in philosophy or in theology."¹⁹

Another place of agreement in epistemology is on the question of how knowledge is possible. According to Schaeffer, knowledge of God and knowledge of the world are possible because of God's revelation. However, human knowledge is never the same as God's knowledge. In answer to idealism, Van Til stressed that we can know truly though not comprehensively. We can know because we are not forced into univocal knowledge, but can rely on analogy, or "thinking God's thoughts after him." Schaeffer had the same concern, although he preferred saying we can know "truly" yet not "exhaustively."

Further research into Schaeffer's epistemology reveals he owed something to Scottish Realism. He thus trusted that being the image of God was in some ways a sufficient precondition for natural judgments about the world. He also had some sympathies with Gordon Clark, who debated Van Til on the extent of human knowledge, pleading for more commonality with God at certain points. To illustrate, Schaeffer was fond of saying that God is Infinite and Personal. On the "side" of his infinity, there is a deep chasm between God and man. But on the side of his personality, they have much in common. Critics like John Mitchell believe Schaeffer's concept betrays a commitment to rationalism, whereby man only knows less than God, but in the same way as God knows.²⁰ I am not so sure the criticism is entirely accurate. Schaeffer, by placing God and man on the same level in that both are personal, never meant to equate human and divine knowledge. What he was more attempting to do is combat skepticism. Van Til was much more careful to delineate between *analogy*, the Christian way,

¹⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 49; *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 17, 35.

¹⁸ See "Apologetic Methodology," 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁰ Unpublished paper by John Mitchell entitled "A Critique of Schaeffer's *The God Who Is There*" (kindly provided by Robert D. Knudsen) 5-6.

and either *univocal* (knowing the same way as God) and *equivocal* (knowing entirely differently from God) knowledge. At the same time, he too based the possibility of human knowledge on the “absolute personality of God,” which is behind the human personality.²¹ (Furthermore, Schaeffer always distinguished between *rationalism* and *rationality*, believing as did Van Til that God is rational, and so we live in a rational universe, and we can think his thoughts after him.)

Yet another area of agreement is the emphasis of both men on the ethical nature of the Fall. They both understood that unbelieving thought tends to view the problem of humanity as one of finitude, or helplessness, rather than one of moral rebellion against God. Schaeffer called this the “problem of scale” as opposed to the “problem of morals.” He criticized many modern theologians for regarding man as fallen man from the beginning. Van Til does the same thing. In fact, it can be said that Van Til and Schaeffer both believe human beings to be moral creatures. Certain statements of Van Til’s could come right out of Schaeffer’s mouth: “In conjunction with man’s false ideal of knowledge, we may mention here the fact that when man saw he could not attain his own false ideal of knowledge he blamed this on his finite character. Man confused finitude with sin. Thus he commingled the metaphysical and the ethical aspects of reality.”²² Or again, “because man is a creature of God, it is impossible that he should ever be alienated from God metaphysically”; and, “it was exactly because of this fact that man is, as a matter of fact, utterly dependent upon God, that a complete ethical alienation could take place. And it is for the same reason that the ethical alienation can be removed.”²³

Using his own special terminology, Francis Schaeffer said essentially the same thing: “With this answer [the ‘personal beginning’ of Christianity] there is a possibility of keeping morals and metaphysics separate. This is a profound thing, though it may sound simple. Whereas the impersonal beginning leads us to a merging of morals and metaphysics, the personal beginning provides the possibility of keeping them separate.”²⁴ Or, again, Schaeffer affirms, “Christianity says man is now abnormal—he is separated from his Creator, who is his only sufficient reference point—not by a metaphysical limitation, but by true moral guilt.”²⁵

Another, very significant area of agreement is the “indirect method.” Van Til insisted that issues between believers and unbelievers could not be settled by any *direct* appeal to facts or laws, because the criteria whereby we

²¹ Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 42.

²² Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 16.

²³ Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: Den Dulk Foundation, 1969) 197.

²⁴ Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 27.

²⁵ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 104.

determine what those facts and laws mean are not the same. Instead, "The Christian apologist must place himself upon the position of his opponent, assuming the correctness of his method merely for argument's sake, in order to show him that on such a position the 'facts' are not facts and the 'laws' are not laws."²⁶

In keeping with his brand of presuppositionalism, Schaeffer's favorite method of attack in a conversation with an unbeliever was to ask him to consider his presuppositions and then push him to become more consistent with them, in order to show him how dark the world was without Christ. He called this "taking the roof off someone's house." He knew that no one could live consistently with non-Christian presuppositions, and that this would give him an opening for the gospel.²⁷ This is very similar, if not identical, to Van Til's idea of "getting on your opponent's ground for the sake of argument." He even talks of the true method of apologetics that must "tear off [that] iron mask."²⁸ Schaeffer says that the Christian, "lovingly and with true tears, must remove the shelter and allow the truth of the external world and of what man is to beat upon him."²⁹ Both use the method known as "the impossibility of the contrary." The only difference is that Van Til's language is somewhat more philosophically informed, while Schaeffer's is more illustrative. Schaeffer has possibly gone farther than his teacher in using this approach as a psychological device, digging into various tensions in the unbeliever's awareness.

Van Til and Schaeffer also agreed on the significance of history. Schaeffer did not use the term *common grace*, but he had the same notion that, although everything was predestined according to God's will, yet history has meaning, and the free offer of the gospel is genuinely made even to the non-elect. Choices made affect the direction of history, even though God has ordained everything. Predestination is not determinism. The rational formulation of this and other apparent contradictions is not available to us, but that does not mean the world is irrational. Schaeffer called these paradoxes "the absolute limits of the Christian Faith."³⁰ He was remarkably close to Van Til not only on the issues but also on their place in the scheme of things.

There are no doubt numerous other places of agreement as well. But we need to look now at the differences.

II. *Two Preliminary Problems*

We shall consider the differences in three stages. First, some problem areas, which, though important, are perhaps not as basic as the ones to be covered in the next sections. Second, some crucial differences. Finally, the matter of tone.

²⁶ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 100.

²⁷ This method is laid out in *The God Who Is There*, 119-36.

²⁸ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 101.

²⁹ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 129.

³⁰ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Church before the Watching World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1971) 83ff.

Let us look at two problem areas, ones which Van Til himself picked up. The first is the question of the point of contact. This issue gained importance in our century because of Karl Barth's denial of common ground between revelation and natural man. In his well-known polemics with Emil Brunner, he asserted that the only possible "point of connection" is in the divine message itself. Because of that, dogmatics must be left to do its work, unencumbered by anthropological or apologetical considerations.³¹ Van Til strongly asserts the reality of the point of contact, not as common ground, which would indeed be a concession to human standards, but as revelation *in every human being*. Following Calvin, Van Til showed the necessity of knowing God as a basis for knowing anything at all.³² In opposition both to Barth, who resisted any natural knowledge of God, and to Roman Catholicism (and even evangelicalism), which places the criteria of truth in natural man, he assigned the point of contact to human consciousness, which is constantly aware of God. Men know God truly, however, because of the Trinity. God voluntarily reveals himself to people, and so the criteria for truth are in him, not in the consciousness itself. Van Til chided Charles Hodge, whom he otherwise admired, for giving too much credence to the correct use of reason by the unbeliever.³³ Van Til's approach to the point of contact was very carefully worked out and was meant to fit the rest of Reformed theology. On the one hand, men are totally ignorant of God because of sin. So the point of contact cannot be in human reason or in human aspirations. On the other hand, God's revelation always gets through. Therefore, "man's very constitution as a rational and moral being is itself revelational."³⁴

Van Til discerned two strands in Schaeffer. The first is compatible with his own view of the point of contact. Beginning from the view that Christianity is the only answer, and that God has given clear revelation of himself, Schaeffer agrees that "as image bearers of God all men, deep down in their hearts, know God is their creator."³⁵ But then he found another strand in Schaeffer that says revelation is only partial. He remarked that Schaeffer does not really allow Christ to diagnose the disease, because he finds the point of contact with the unbeliever "in some area of interpretation of man and the world that [you] have in common with him."³⁶ Van Til was especially concerned about Schaeffer's famous illustration of the torn book. The idea is that general revelation can be compared to a man finding a book that has been mutilated, where only one inch of printed matter remains on each page. He recognizes something that makes sense, but he cannot piece it together himself. Then he finds the remainder in the attic, and knows that it is the missing pages. Schaeffer compares this to the unbeliever looking

³¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (2d ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) §3.

³² Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 38.

³³ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁵ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 24.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

at the world. Then he finds the Scriptures, which provide the key to the less clear material from general revelation.

This illustration is indeed a problem. Van Til's point is that according to orthodoxy general revelation is every bit as clear as special revelation, though its scope is different. If *both* appear unclear it is because of the human heart, not the data. General revelation, according to Romans 1, enables us to know God, but we hinder the truth in unrighteousness. Schaeffer, on the other hand, makes concessions to natural theology, according to which general revelation provides knowledge of God which is good enough as far as it goes, but needs completion. Van Til said that in Schaeffer's view natural man is competent to judge whether Scripture is the appropriate complement to general revelation.

I think Van Til was right here, though a little severe. Presumably because of its ambiguity, Schaeffer elucidated what he meant by the book illustration in a number of places, and this helps us better understand what he meant and did not mean. For example, in *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* he says:

This illustration is important for two reasons. First, it emphasizes that Christians do not start out from themselves autonomously, as the humanists try to do. God gives the pages, and thus gives the answers.

Second, it helps us see the proper place of man's reason. Just as a scientist does not create the order in the universe but does recognize it, so reason does not create the answer but simply recognizes it. Of course this does not mean that reason will necessarily *receive* the answer. Each person has to *choose* to receive God's truth. But God's truth is clear.³⁷

While not altogether free from difficulties, this statement does disclaim autonomous reason and the competence of natural man to judge revelation. Of course Schaeffer's distinction between "recognizing" and "receiving" is not especially convincing, since the Bible teaches that we cannot even recognize the "order" without new hearts. Reason without regeneration is not even competent to judge what has been observed. Yet he does say that the truth is clear and that our problem is in receiving the truth, not in its ambiguity. This makes Van Til's critique a little exaggerated, especially when he said, "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. The claim of God upon man is reduced and to that extent he may have an excuse."³⁸

Anyone acquainted with Schaeffer's message knows how strongly he affirmed that we have no excuse whatsoever. The very opposite was his conviction. The sermons in *Death in the City* ring out with the terrifying message

³⁷ Francis A. Schaeffer and C. Everett Koop, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming Revell, 1979) 152.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

of judgment. There is no excuse.³⁹ At the same time, the discussion of the point of contact brings up a related problem. When Schaeffer described the point of contact, what he had in mind was more in line with what Van Til called methodology, not the idea itself of the point of contact. In fact, rather than call it the point of contact, Schaeffer prefers "point of communication." Put very simply, there is a place of tension, or the inconsistency between a person's beliefs and the real world, which allows conversation to begin:

If the man before you were logical to his non-Christian presuppositions you would have no point of communication with him . . . But in reality no one can live logically according to his own non-Christian presuppositions, and consequently, because he is faced with the real world and himself, in *practice* you will find a place where you can talk.⁴⁰

However, Van Til found difficulty with Schaeffer's view that the *inconsistency* of fallen man gives such an opportunity. The inconsistency demonstrated in the natural man may present a psychological reality, and an occasion for discussion, but not the point of contact as far as apologetics is concerned.⁴¹ This is an interesting question. Schaeffer indeed stresses that while in principle there should be no conversation possible between Christian and non-Christian, in practice there is: "It would be impossible to have communication if he were consistent. But in reality no one can live logically according to his own non-Christian presuppositions, and consequently, because he is faced with the real world and himself, in *practice* you will find a place where you can talk."⁴² It is interesting to speculate on exactly what is meant by the "real world." It does appear that Schaeffer has some sympathies with Scottish Realism, which sees commonality as possible because of the way the world was made. And yet, in discussing the point of communication, Schaeffer is careful to add that he is looking for a point of entry and not a concession to some sort of neutrality.⁴³ But Van Til is still concerned, because even with the disclaimer, it seems to him to be a foot in the door to common ground. So as to avoid ambiguity, Van Til distinguishes between *occasion* and *argument*. He believes what Schaeffer calls "the real world" must not be qualified as having any ability to do the work that only argument must do.⁴⁴

I believe there is a subtle difference here, because Schaeffer allows natural theology into his thinking. But at least some of that difference is in the

³⁹ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Death in the City* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1969).

⁴⁰ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 126.

⁴¹ Van Til's comment in the margin of Richard B. Keyes, "Christian Apologetics" (paper submitted to Cornelius Van Til for the course, Apologetics 4111, Nov. 31, 1967, on file in the author's possession) 51-52.

⁴² Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 126.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Comment on Keyes' paper, "Christian Apologetics," 52.

language used rather than in the substance. For some reason, Van Til has missed the remarkable similarity between himself and Schaeffer insofar as they both recognize that even error depends on the reality of God's world. For example, in *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til says:

It is just because the world and man are, as the Scriptures teach, created for one another and directed toward their goal through redemption by Christ, that human predication is possible. And by the same token reasoning with unbelievers is possible and fruitful for believers just so far as believers remain true to their own basic presupposition. True to this presupposition they can *for argument's sake*, place themselves with the unbeliever on his presupposition, in order then to show him that he cannot even raise an intelligible objection against the Christian view. For in objecting to the Christian view he has to presuppose its truth.⁴⁵

We noted in the previous section that both Van Til and Schaeffer use an "indirect" method. Van Til is more consistent in applying it. He affirms that only because Christianity is true can we talk to the unbeliever. Now, he is referring more to the methodology of getting over onto the unbeliever's side, laying bare his presupposition, than to the point of contact. But this is not a very significant difference with Schaeffer, in my judgment, because the method is so similar. According to Van Til, the believer knows the Christian message, and deep-down, so does the unbeliever.⁴⁶ Schaeffer prefers calling this the unbeliever's contact with the real world, with God behind the real world. But whether it is wiser to express it as "pressure" from the real world, or the sense of deity, is not crucial. In both cases, it is God who shows himself to the unbeliever.

There is an element of natural theology in Schaeffer's position. In his development of the "point of tension" Schaeffer says something rather astonishing: "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."⁴⁷ Now, to be sure, Schaeffer is simply trying to guard against fideism here. But his language is unwise at best. Again, along with Scottish Realism, he seems to believe in some sort of ideal order, a truth which can be used in an argument with modern persons. Van Til asserts it is possible to communicate with unbelievers without giving in to natural theology: "Only by thus finding the point of contact in man's sense of deity that lies underneath his own conception of self-consciousness as ultimate can we be both true to Scripture and effective in reasoning with the natural man."⁴⁸ So there is a difference in the two positions regarding the point of contact. Francis Schaeffer was not consistently able to guard against natural theology, whereas Van Til was.

⁴⁵ Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 180.

⁴⁶ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 57-8.

⁴⁷ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 129.

⁴⁸ Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 58.

This brings us to the second of the two preliminary problems between Van Til and Schaeffer. It is the matter of historiography. In general, Schaeffer believed in a "rise and fall" theory of civilization.⁴⁹ This can be illustrated in a number of ways. He taught that in the late nineteenth century, philosophy, followed by other parts of Western culture, crossed a "line of despair." Before that time people accepted "absolutes." They believed "A is not non-A." After the line, this antithesis was rejected, and people accepted the despair of nihilism, mysticism, and irrationalism. This is all centered in "the leap of faith."⁵⁰ The door was opened, according to Schaeffer, by Hegel and Kierkegaard. But soon there followed a similar "leap" in art, music, "general culture," and, finally, theology. Neo-orthodox theology, following the trend, is simply a "crisis first-order experience . . . without verification or communicable content."⁵¹

Schaeffer's analysis is supported by myriad illustrations from poetry, music, politics, and science. One of his theses is that modern science arrived at the same time as the Renaissance and the Reformation, and that there are many points of compatibility between science and Christianity.⁵² He cites Francis Bacon as a key player. He quotes favorably Alfred North Whitehead's remark that Christianity was the mother of science because of its belief in a rational God. Racing through people and trends, from Boyle to Newton to Einstein, Schaeffer shows that as long as science held to rationality it was compatible with the Bible. But then, he argues, a dramatic shift occurred. After placing too much hope on unaided reason, modern science became "modern-modern science," which operated in a closed system, pushing God to the edges. This led to modern determinism and behaviorism, and ultimately to the divorce between science and values.⁵³

Cornelius Van Til takes issue with this scheme.⁵⁴ He firmly asserts that there is basically no difference in the types of unbelief since the earliest times. All philosophy suffers from the dilemma of Heraclitus against Parmenides. In his view, Schaeffer gives the impression that things are qualitatively different now from the way they were before. This is a valid criticism. In a sense no real differences can be established between the Greeks and the moderns when it comes to the fundamental structure. Still, Van Til himself admitted that Immanuel Kant was a kind of watershed figure. With Dooyeweerd, he sees a change of motive occurring in the late eighteenth century.

⁴⁹ This is discussed in the opening section of *The God Who Is There*. He develops it in *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1970). It is also a central theme in *How Should We Then Live?* which was an eleven-episode television series as well as a book (Old Tappan: Fleming Revell, 1976).

⁵⁰ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 44.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵² See Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* 130ff.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 166; see also Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century*, 13.

⁵⁴ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 39ff.

His attack on Schaeffer is justified, but it tends to caricature his position, for surely Schaeffer would admit that at some basic level all unbelief has the same features.

I find Robert D. Knudsen's approach far more equitable in critiquing Francis Schaeffer. In his article in the Van Til *Festschrift* he joins those who see the flaw in the golden-age approach to the history of thought. The idea of the "line of despair" and the watershed period of Kant and Hegel is not altogether sound. But he is eager to recognize the virtue in Schaeffer's historiography as well:

There is, it must be admitted, a real element of truth in Schaeffer's contention that something happened about this time to the idea of truth. There came into being a dialectical logic, which sanctioned the antinomy. This logic is certainly present in Hegel. Further, even though it is difficult to see why Schaeffer is so nonchalant about setting Kierkegaard over against Hegel's both-and; nevertheless, a deeper acquaintance with Kierkegaard reveals that he, too, in his idea of truth had little respect for the ordinary canons of logic and that for him existential truth is paradoxical. From these nineteenth-century thinkers it is not difficult to trace a line of irrationalism down into the present and to illustrate this irrationalism in all kinds of movements within contemporary culture.

One thing among others that Schaeffer leaves unexplained, however, is why the apostate philosophy was that much better before it learned to employ dialectic.⁵⁵

The rest of this section is worth looking at carefully, for Knudsen shows that the reason Schaeffer misses the unity between the ancients and the moderns at this point is because he has an inadequate understanding of the limits of logic, and the need for a radically biblical foundation for even such common laws as the excluded middle. It seems to me at any rate that this more moderate approach, though firmly critical when it comes to issues like rationalism, is nevertheless more fair than Van Til to the nuances in Schaeffer's own thought.

III. *Crucial Differences*

Now we come to what I think really does divide the two thinkers at the most basic level. Even here, I believe we will find that Van Til is essentially right, but excessive, in his critique. Again, I will pick two matters which seem to me to be crucial.

Let us begin right away with what I think is the most important issue. It is the question of rationalism. Schaeffer was concerned in all of his work to vindicate the truth. There are numerous references to truth in his writings, and it could be argued that the most central part of his mission

⁵⁵ Robert D. Knudsen, "Progressive and Regressive Tendencies in Christian Apologetics," in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussions on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til* (ed. E. R. Geehan; Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971) 289-90.

was to call the world to consider the truth. Much is at stake, then, in determining what he meant by truth. Putting the pieces together, we can find the main features of truth. Most centrally, truth means *absolutes*. Schaeffer used the notion of absolutes in at least three ways. First, *ontological* absolutes. This means there is an absolute reality, that is, "A concept which is not modifiable by factors such as culture, individual psychology or circumstances, but which is perfect and unchangeable."⁵⁶ Second, *epistemological* absolutes. Schaeffer was very critical of what he liked to call "existentialist methodology," by which he meant arriving at a position by denying the distinction between "A and non-A." Indeed, the notion of antithesis is at the heart of his view of truth and at the heart of apologetic method: "The unity of orthodox or evangelical Christianity should be centered around this emphasis on *truth*. It is always important, but doubly so when we are surrounded by so many for whom the concept of truth, in the sense of antithesis, is considered to be totally unthinkable."⁵⁷ The opposite of this, found abundantly in modern culture, is flux and chance.

Third, *moral* absolutes. This is probably the most frequently emphasized aspect of absolutes for Schaeffer. Moral absolutes flow from the first two. Schaeffer believed it proper to speak of orthodoxy in theology and orthodoxy in practice. Many of his writings stress the need to be consistent between doctrine and life. But at the heart of his moral system is the notion of absolutes. In his series *No Little People*, he distinguishes between false moral standards, which permeated previous ages, and the absence of moral standards altogether, which permeates our own day.⁵⁸

The truth is not only explained in terms of absolutes but also by the idea of coherence. This means the test of truth is whether or not consistency is present. Behind other confirmations of facts is this most basic verification. He stressed that the Bible was unique in that it invited us to examine the evidence for its claims. We can know that Christ rose from the dead, for example, because of the "space-time proofs" that the gospel accounts offer us. But behind the possibility of making such judgments is truth. At the heart of verification three criteria are involved. Schaeffer summarized the three in two rubrics: "A. The theory must be noncontradictory and must give an answer to the phenomenon in question. B. We must be able to live consistently with our theory."⁵⁹ We can see how important the idea of consistency is to his notion of truth. One could say truth for Schaeffer is judged according to whether it is (1) self-consistent, (2) consistent with "reality," and (3) consistent with the life of the person who holds it. The coherency theory of truth has had many advocates, though it now faces hard times.

⁵⁶ Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, 62.

⁵⁷ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 169.

⁵⁸ Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Little People* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1974) 79-80.

⁵⁹ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 109.

Schaeffer revised it and took the idea of the necessity of truth first to considerable extremes. For example, he developed the principle of "pre-evangelism," whereby before commending the gospel the Christian must present "truth" to the unbeliever:

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. All people, whether they realize it or not, function in the framework of some concept of truth. Our concept of truth will radically affect our understanding of what it means to become a Christian. We are concerned at this point, not with the *content* of truth so much as with the *concept* of what truth is.⁶⁰

Curiously, Schaeffer does not strictly equate either the Scripture or God with the truth. The truth, in fact, is not "*ultimately* related" to the Scriptures. God himself is what he calls "the final screen of truth." Thus, God is "behind" the truth, but is not equated with truth itself.⁶¹

This, of course, is a major problem, one which Van Til noted in his critique with great concern. Interestingly, Van Til was primarily worried that Schaeffer's views led to the inability to convince an unbeliever. Rather than simply accuse him of rationalism, Van Til focuses on the impossibility of presenting God to someone with whose standards he agrees:

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.⁶²

Here Van Til is pointing out to Schaeffer that he is not being radical in his communication with an unbeliever. He accepts the criterion of "consistency" uncritically, and measures the Christian faith by its standard. Again, Schaeffer's system requires us to submit Christianity to natural theology, rather than affirm it as self-authenticating.

Here I believe Van Til is right. There is an underlying rationalism in much of Schaeffer's thinking. His view of truth is abstract, in that it is not strictly equated with God, but is a more general idea of which God is only "the final screen." Furthermore, Schaeffer often spoke of Christianity conforming to "reality," or to "what is," without clearly distinguishing between the Creator and the creature. He was so anxious to show that the gospel was not irrational that he fell into a kind of naive realism. As we saw,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 145-46.

⁶² Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 26.

he praised Francis Bacon and other early Western scientists because they believed that a reasonable God had created a reasonable universe which could be investigated by the use of human reason.⁶³ He did not ferret out in these men the very dualism he is ordinarily fond of identifying. He accepted the basic premise of seventeenth-century science uncritically. Nature is like a book which can be read using the tools of reason and measurement. Thus, when he describes what he calls "modern-modern sciences," science that does not begin with God, the only problem he sees with it is that it operates within a closed universe.

One could find many other examples of rationalism in Schaeffer's approach. Yet there is a problem in Van Til's criticism. It is certainly right as far as it goes. At the same time, it is disappointing that he did not entertain the possibility that Schaeffer used all kinds of secondary material not because he endorsed them as a system, but because (taken in isolation from the system) they support a point. Throughout his critique, Van Til sifts everything he reads of Schaeffer's through the grid of the ultimate starting point. Accordingly, he only sees compromise in Schaeffer's apologetics. At almost every point, he says Schaeffer is not presenting Christianity and other views as "mutually exclusive." Certainly, his rationalist trait does prevent him from being as radical as he could have been, yet he was simply not dealing with ultimate philosophical commitments at every point. He was concerned to use arguments supported by God-given human wisdom. In doing so, in fact, he could validate one of the very doctrines Van Til also cared about: the common-grace wisdom given to non-Christians.

Often, what Van Til perceives to be accommodation to unregenerate forms of knowledge is simply taking the knowledge given to all men seriously. When pressed, Schaeffer would admit that the only reason unbelievers could hold to things that are true is because of God's common grace. Van Til takes him to task for teaching that man is a noble being and can influence history despite the fall. "But surely this is true," says Van Til, "because in the last analysis, God's plan directs history."⁶⁴ But Schaeffer would have no problem with that. I well remember my student days at Westminster. Living in Switzerland gave me the advantage of being able to go back and forth between the two settings and the two apologetists. Having

⁶³ Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*, 15. Schaeffer quotes the *Organum Scientiarum*'s well-known statement about being able to repair the loss of innocence through religion and the loss of dominion through science and art. Van Til, replying to Schaeffer, refers to the *Instauratio*, where Bacon relies heavily on the inductive method for truth. Neither of them goes into any discussion, well-merited, I believe, of the relation of Bacon's epistemology to the rise of the scientific method. Van Til expedites Bacon by saying he "works as the typically autonomous man," but says nothing of the capital he may have borrowed from Christianity. See Charles Webster, *The Great Instauratio: Science, Medicine and Reform, 1626-1660* (New York: Holmes & Meeter, 1975).

⁶⁴ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 31.

been convinced of Van Til's approach, I would go to l'Abri and ask Schaeffer whether he believed various positions articulated at Westminster Seminary. He usually wholeheartedly agreed. He did have a concern about Westminster's theology, which is that at times it appeared to affirm fideism.

In thinking these matters through, then, I have come to believe that while much of the time Van Til was right in his attack on Schaeffer's rationalism, some of the time he misread his intentions. When Schaeffer's purpose was to explore general revelation in order to support an argument, Van Til could only see a concession to "autonomy." He seemed not to appreciate the fact that *some of the time* Schaeffer's use of insights from other people was strategic rather than positional. In other words, he was making use of evidences in a strategy with an unbeliever. Van Til himself often said that one could begin a conversation with any point in creation. Because all coheres in God, there is no reason to proclaim God's name all the time, but one can talk about the trees, the birds, and any fact, because they are already interpreted by revelation.

The second major issue that separates Van Til and Schaeffer is related to the first, but it has its own identity. It is the concept of presuppositions. Van Til believed that although Schaeffer used presuppositions, he did not mean the same thing by them as does the transcendental method. The difference is this. Van Til, consistent with his entire approach, declares that unless one presupposes the ontological Trinity, the self-attesting Christ, and the self-authenticating Scriptures, one has no basis for predication. The authority of the Creator therefore permeates everything. The creature, in order to respect the distinction between himself and God, can only think his thoughts after God. His approach to unbelieving thought will therefore be confrontational and transcendental. This is a crucial concept. To be truly radical, the Christian presupposition is transcendental in that not only does it account for meaning and existence, but also for the very nature of the non-Christian thought it seeks to challenge and dismantle.

Thus, in Van Til's view, God is self-contained. There is no test of God's truth that can be somehow behind him or above him. He is self-defining. This means, among other things, that one cannot know anything at all unless one knows God. This is because only God can define what he has sovereignly created. Naturally, unbelievers can know something of the truth, but only on "borrowed capital." In arguing with an unbeliever, then, one may never leave his own platform for the sake of reaching out. Our worldviews are polar opposites. Technically, even when we look together with a non-Christian friend at the sunset, we cannot agree that we have seen the same thing, because our knowledge is by reference to God, and his is not. Therefore, when we reason with the unbeliever, we do not appeal to a commonly held standard. We either confront him with the inadequacy of his own, or we seek to persuade him of the validity of ours. In that sense, arguments for ultimate questions must be circular. Not the

vicious circle of *a priori* reasoning, but the total circle of the Christian worldview, which includes the character of God and the character of creation as God defines it.

Now Francis Schaeffer comes very close to this approach in places. But at bottom, he does something rather different. Presuppositions do not mean the same thing for both apologists. Although Schaeffer says that apologetics cannot be done without presuppositions in the modern age, that is because today there is no shared presupposition with people after the line of despair. Before, as we noted earlier, there was a sort of understanding that “absolutes” were right, which was a shared presupposition. Not only is the notion of abstract absolutes out of accord with Van Til’s epistemology, as we have seen, but the idea of presuppositions is also different. Schaeffer sees them as “a belief or theory which is assumed before the next step in logic is developed. Such a prior postulate often consciously or unconsciously affects the way a person subsequently reasons.”⁶⁵ As Van Til points out, this is nothing much more than a *hypothesis*, or a starting point.⁶⁶ This is so, even though one of the linchpins of Schaeffer’s methodology is that there are only two basic presuppositions possible, Christian and non-Christian, and only one of them really “fits the facts.” This is consistent with what we saw above, about appealing to *reality* as a test of truth.⁶⁷

At bottom, then, Schaeffer’s view of presuppositions does not allow him truly to be transcendental. Rather, he uses presuppositions as a kind of adjunct to various traditional methods in apologetical argument. One of them is the method of negation. On the surface this appears similar to Van Til’s method by the “impossibility of the contrary.” But in fact it is rather different. Schaeffer says there are only four “possible answers” to origins. (1) The impersonal plus time plus chance have produced a personal man. But that is impossible because “it is against all experience.” (2) Man is not personal, but dead. But this is not possible because man cannot live as though he were a machine. (3) The answer will be discovered in the future. This cannot work, because science would end, and no one can live by holding his breath until an answer comes along. (4) Finally, relativity may come to the rescue. But this will not work, because relativity depends on the constancy of the speed of light.⁶⁸ Now, the problem is, Schaeffer never says by what criterion this procedure can work. Why are there only four possibilities? Why should coherency be the (unspoken) test of the validity of one position against the other?

Presuppositions really do not function in this kind of argument, except as a general assumption that doctrines Christians cannot accept are not reasonable and are full of contradictions. About all this Van Til rightly says

⁶⁵ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 179.

⁶⁶ Van Til, “Apologetic Methodology,” 36, 53.

⁶⁷ In *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 17, Schaeffer says, “The truth of Christianity is that it is true to what is there.”

⁶⁸ Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There*, 110–11. See, for a similar argument, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 5–20.

that Schaeffer expects that "Christianity prove itself true to the apostate man in terms of the standard that this apostate man has devised, i.e. (a) the idea of human autonomy (b) the idea of pure contingent factuality and (c) the idea of a pure abstract principle of rationality."⁶⁹ This amounts to his using the traditional method of Butler and Aquinas. While I think it is closer to the so-called "verification" method of E. J. Carnell and Gordon Clark than to Butler and Aquinas, Van Til probably would not have considered this distinction significant.⁷⁰

There is a criticism to which Van Til might have been alert, but did not bring out, though one might have expected that he do so, knowing his background in Kuyper. Schaeffer's view of presuppositions is almost exclusively ideational. He often said, "As a man thinks so he is." He went to great lengths to show that in culture, in history, even in the arts, the *concept* comes first, then the actuality. In fact, it is the heart that is basic to all else that is human. And the heart cannot be reduced to an idea. There is a tendency in Schaeffer of reducing the modes of human existence to ideas.⁷¹ This is in keeping with what he says elsewhere in defense of biblical inerrancy. For Schaeffer the Bible's message is in terms of "propositional truth." The facts presented in Scripture are "brute facts," a term Van Til rejected flatly.⁷² But in the transcendental approach to apologetics, presuppositions represent a religious commitment, which includes ideas and propositions, but is not limited to these. Presuppositions are whole-souled. Once again, my view is that Van Til is right, though at the same time he avoids discussion of the difficult problem of the use of evidences in Reformed apologetics. His criticism of Schaeffer is unnecessarily severe, especially in that Schaeffer was trying hard to make use of evidences in a responsible fashion, ones that he considered compatible with presuppositions.

IV. A Matter of Tone

We now come to the final section. Here, my evaluation will be somewhat subjective. As all of us know, theological discussions often involve personalities as well as issues. The two apologists being considered certainly had

⁶⁹ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 53.

⁷⁰ Gordon Lewis says of Schaeffer's apologetics, "While the stress on presuppositions sounds like Van Til, the meaning of those statements is more like Carnell's hypothesis, for they are subject to testing by the coherence criterion of truth" (*Testing Christianity's Truth Claims* [Chicago: Moody, 1976] 298). Carnell himself was not enthusiastic about the comparison. See E. J. Carnell, "A Semi-Defense of Francis Schaeffer," *Christian Scholar's Review* 11 (1982) 148-49.

⁷¹ He says, "I use 'presupposition' as a base, and we can choose it" (*He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, 65). Even his friend Rookmaaker, more steeped in Kuyperian thinking than he, tended to accord a primacy to ideas in the arts. See his *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1970).

⁷² Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Final Conflict* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1975) 44.

distinctive personalities as well as distinctive theologies. Both, I believe, had the weaknesses of their strengths.

We mentioned that Van Til occasionally overreacted to statements made by Schaeffer. This is as much a matter of demeanor as it is content. When Schaeffer cited someone approvingly, Van Til did not pause to evaluate the purpose of the citation. In his discussion of the history of science, alluded to earlier, Schaeffer quoted Alfred North Whitehead as saying that modern science has Christian roots because of the worldview held by Christians, which includes a reasonable God. He says Whitehead, though not a Christian, is *right* about this.⁷³ Van Til chides Schaeffer for not making it clear that there are two views of reason, and that the Greek view of reason (held by Whitehead) is utterly different from the biblical view.⁷⁴ But is that not attributing to Schaeffer an error which is beside the point? Schaeffer was simply trying to add fodder for the view, one which has a strong tradition in historiography,⁷⁵ that believing in the fully rational God leads to the freedom to investigate the created world. The fact that non-Christian thinkers have recognized that does not invalidate the point.

In another case, Van Til comes down hard on Schaeffer for supposedly using John 17:21 in a misleading way. Schaeffer's exhortation is to the church, pleading for harmony, in order that unbelievers may judge that the Lord is there. But Van Til says this is to give the unbeliever some sort of right to judge Christianity. He makes it sound as though Schaeffer were setting up some abstract, non-Christian criterion for truth, whereas his point is much more pastoral. He is simply trying to exhort the church to demonstrate love and "show forth the virtue of him who has called us."⁷⁶ Admittedly Schaeffer's language is a bit extravagant. But surely he is not using John 17:21 to justify Thomistic apologetics! Van Til similarly overreacts when Schaeffer, in the book *True Spirituality*, talks of the danger of forgetting we live in a "supernatural" world. Schaeffer's simple point is that "our battle is not against flesh and blood alone." Yet Van Til turns this observation into a formal statement about the "natural" versus the "supernatural" part of the cosmos, with the concomitant Thomistic view of the *donum superadditum*. I find this almost irresponsible.

It is my impression that while Van Til correctly shows up the flaws in certain areas, he then goes on to caricature Schaeffer in ways that make it hard to recognize the man he is talking about. Another example shows this.

⁷³ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1970) 47.

⁷⁴ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 38.

⁷⁵ See for example, *God and Nature* (ed. D. C. Lindberg and R. L. Numbers; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Diogenes Allen points out that this view is not without its problems (*Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989] 23-34). The issue of how much credit Christianity should want to take for a worldview that fed into the Enlightenment may be something Van Til is concerned about in his criticism of Schaeffer.

⁷⁶ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 47ff.

It is Schaeffer's allegory of "the universe and two chairs."⁷⁷ The parable says that there are two men sitting on their chairs in a closed room. The room is all there is, so that it would be possible to study the room and come up with some valid theories about it within a relatively short time. But the one man is a materialist and the other is a Christian. When the materialist finishes his study, in which he benefits from the tools of modern disciplines such as chemistry, biology, physics, etc., he shares his conclusions with the Christian, who then tells him his findings are "drastically incomplete." What he is *missing* is the Bible, which holds the key to the story. Without it, the materialist will never know the origins of the universe, nor the reality of the invisible world, nor a true philosophy of history. Schaeffer then uses this allegory to describe various ways in which people can sit in the chair of faith or the chair of unfaith.

Now, Van Til takes him to task for granting at least partial insights to the non-Christian.⁷⁸ Indeed, the Bible does not say the unbeliever is partly right, but basically wrong in whatever he says. He cannot even predicate without true faith. This criticism is right, I believe. Schaeffer did have a tendency to grant a certain amount of knowledge to the unbeliever. As I have already pointed out, there is some rationalism in Schaeffer, and one of the places it shows itself, no doubt, is in conceding to natural man the ability to know certain things truly, as far as it goes. But then I think Van Til becomes less than fair with Schaeffer. He seems to take it for granted that Schaeffer could not be allowing for the influence of common grace when using this kind of parable. Van Til himself admits unbelievers have much wisdom because of God's common grace to them. Furthermore, he isolates statements in Schaeffer that confirm his fears, from others that should allay them. For example, in the very section of the chairs allegory that Van Til attacks, Schaeffer says:

One man is not a little right and the other a little right and a synthesis better than both. These are two mutually exclusive views—one is right and one is wrong. If you say less than this, then you reduce Christianity to a psychological crutch, a glorified aspirin. That doesn't mean that the Christian can't glean much detail from the materialist's observation. But as far as the comprehensive view of the universe is concerned, there can be no synthesis. Either this man is right and that man wrong, or that man is right and this man is wrong. It's a total antithesis.⁷⁹

Van Til does not take this statement into account, nor does he give Schaeffer any benefit of the doubt. All he can manage to admit is that Schaeffer's intentions may be otherwise. On the contrary, says Van Til:

I do not recall Schaeffer telling modern man this truth about himself anywhere. I have not found any place where Schaeffer offers the Christian position about God, about man and the world as the presupposition of the possibility of

⁷⁷ Found in Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, 127-43.

⁷⁸ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 35.

⁷⁹ Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, 131.

predication in any field. I do not know of any place in Schaeffer's writings where he has presented twentieth century man with a fully biblical diagnosis of his condition.⁸⁰

This is a shocking statement to me. I perused several of Schaeffer's works, including the ones most under consideration here, and found them literally chock-full of statements giving a biblical diagnosis of the bankruptcy of fallen humankind and of the need for presupposing the God of Scripture before making any predication.

Because Van Til is so far off the beam here, it made me wonder where the problem lay. Why does he caricature his student? Could it be that because Schaeffer was inconsistent, that vitiated all the rest? Had Van Til become so concerned with putting things in the right way that it occasionally blinded him from seeing true statements in other people who are less consistent than he? Or could it be that he required of apologists all-or-nothing?

My quarrel with Van Til's treatment of Schaeffer is on still another level. Right as he is, and I do not mean to say this superciliously,⁸¹ I feel it is sad that he did not seem to care much about the fascinating and profound insights Schaeffer had into so many areas of culture and life. Van Til does say very complimentary things about Schaeffer's ministry, but his insights into modern art, into ecology, into computers, and many other things go unnoticed. I am not suggesting that we all should have the same interests. But for someone who claimed to be committed to a worldview approach, and who also loved history, music, and painting, Van Til seems curiously indifferent to discussions of culture.

Francis Schaeffer had his own problems of tone. For one thing, he tended to disparage the formal world of theological research. I well remember his reactions upon hearing about Van Til's critique. He dismissed him as a "classroom apologist." The implication was that at l'Abri he worked with real live people and that he was doing trench warfare with unbelievers. Somehow this was supposed to validate his method over Van Til's. In a manner reminiscent of Marxism (which Schaeffer would have disavowed vigorously), the practical was more real than the theoretical. This is a trait common to many American evangelicals. But it ignores the all too real battles of the mind. There is a place for the kind of pure theology Van Til engaged in. Indeed, scrutinizing other apologists, including Francis Schaeffer, is a crucial responsibility for a fellow Christian with Van Til's mission.

Ironically, Schaeffer wanted very much to be academically credible. But he did not feel at home with academics. Besides, he was wrong to imply Van Til was not doing trench warfare. Schaeffer may not have known his teacher's

⁸⁰ Van Til, "Apologetic Methodology," 35.

⁸¹ It has been very important for me as a l'Abriite to work through these critiques both because it has helped me see some important flaws in Schaeffer, and because it has helped confirm me in the transcendentalism of Van Til.

love of preaching, his evangelistic conversations with neighbors, his hospital visitations. It is a little known fact that in the fall of 1978 Van Til went to New York and preached the gospel on Wall Street before a feisty crowd. Schaeffer often talked of the spirit of love, and chided the church, particularly the separatist churches, for lacking in love. One could not lodge this accusation at Van Til. I will never forget the day one of my fellow students gave a seminar presentation in one of Van Til's classes. While the presentation had many fine qualities, it showed some serious deficiencies in doctrinal areas. After the class, Van Til took a couple of us aside and asked about that student's spiritual condition. We then prayed together for him.

Why did not these two Christian warriors profit from each other's work any more than they did? They had several opportunities to sit down and talk, but they only did it a couple of times, somewhat under duress. They somehow did not care to engage each other in serious face-to-face discussions of the many questions at hand. That is a great shame. They had so much to talk about. The discussion would have so benefited the church. While we can learn much from both of these men, we could have learned much more had they sharpened their apologetics in deliberation one with the other.

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